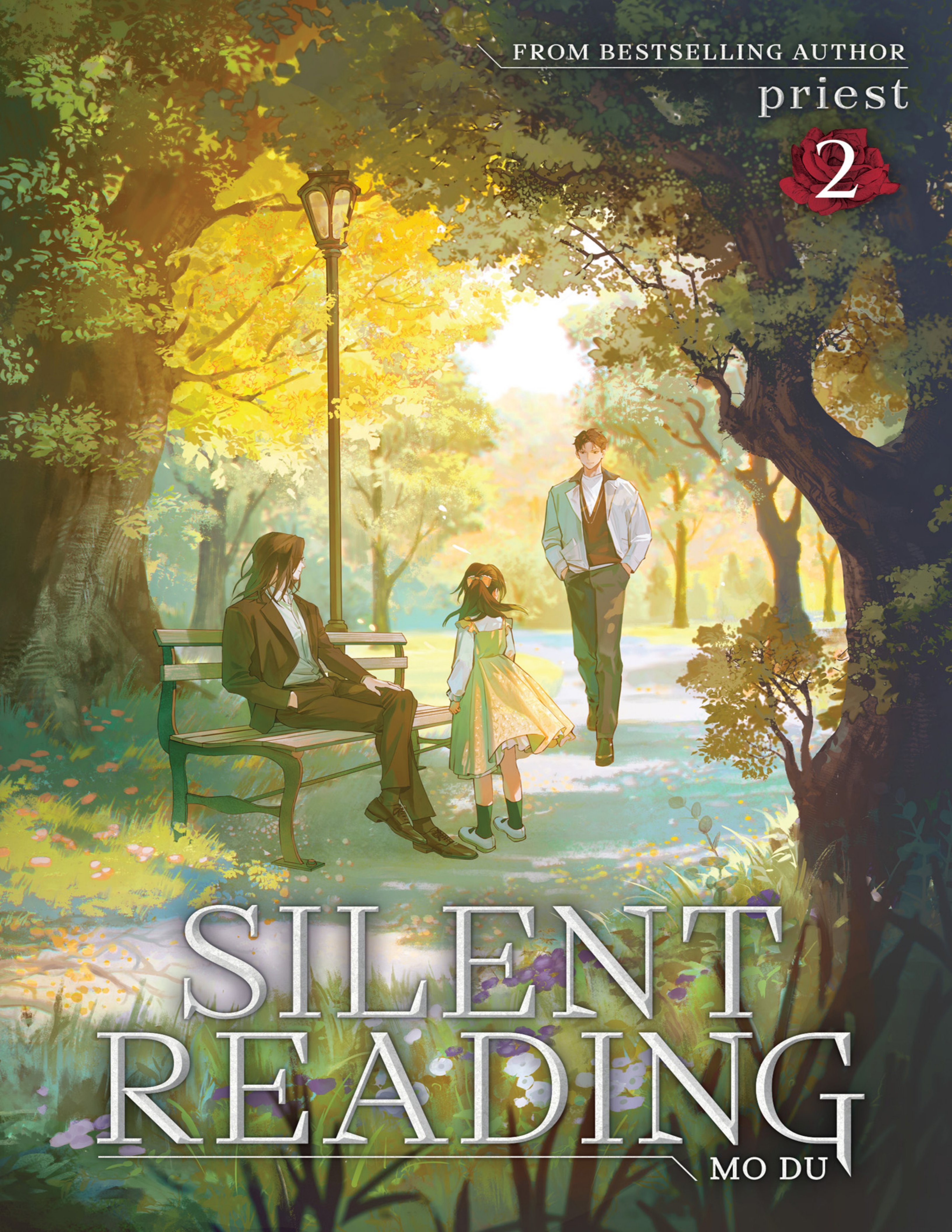

FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR

priest

2

SILENT READING

MO DU

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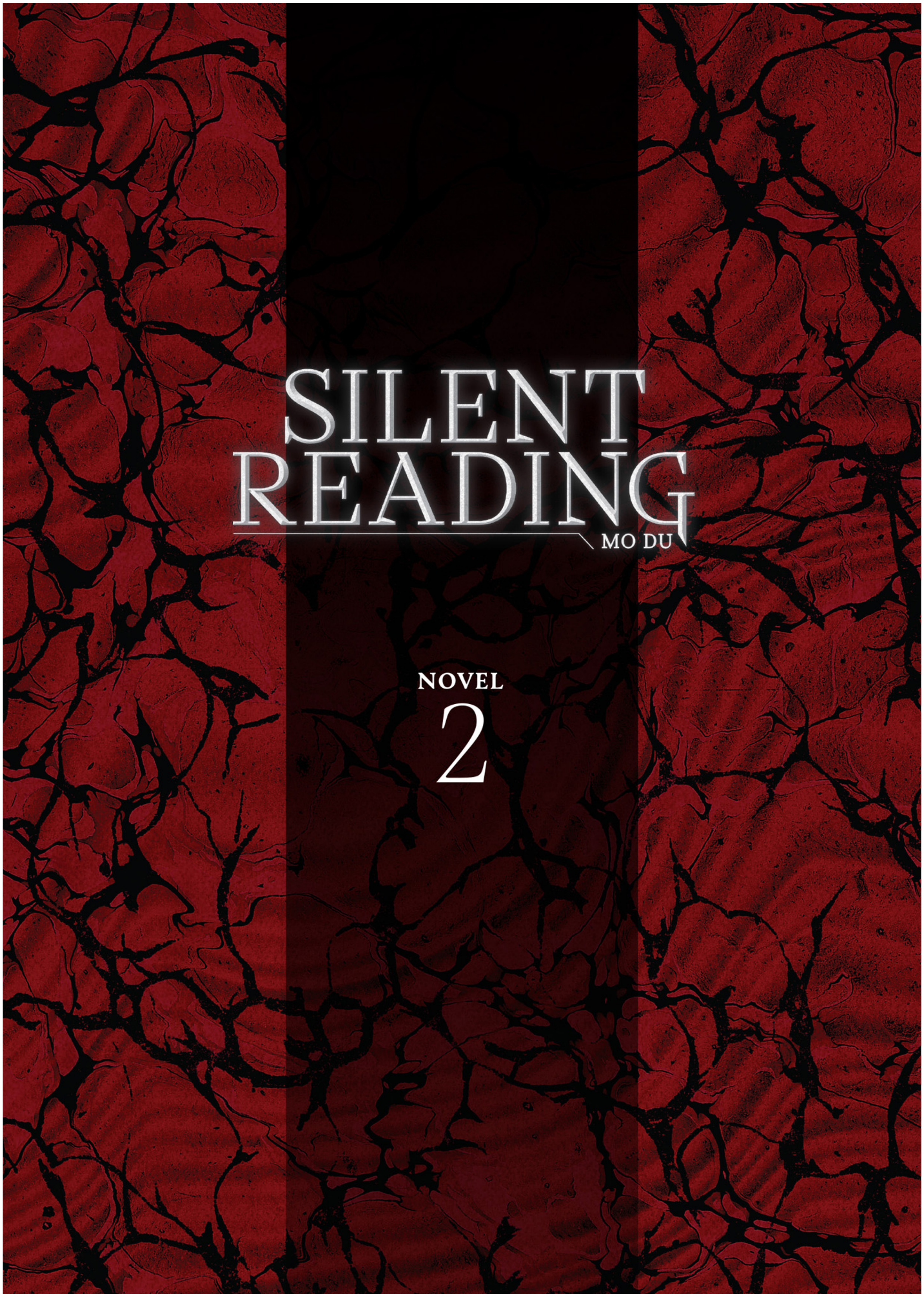

SILENT READING

MO DU

NOVEL

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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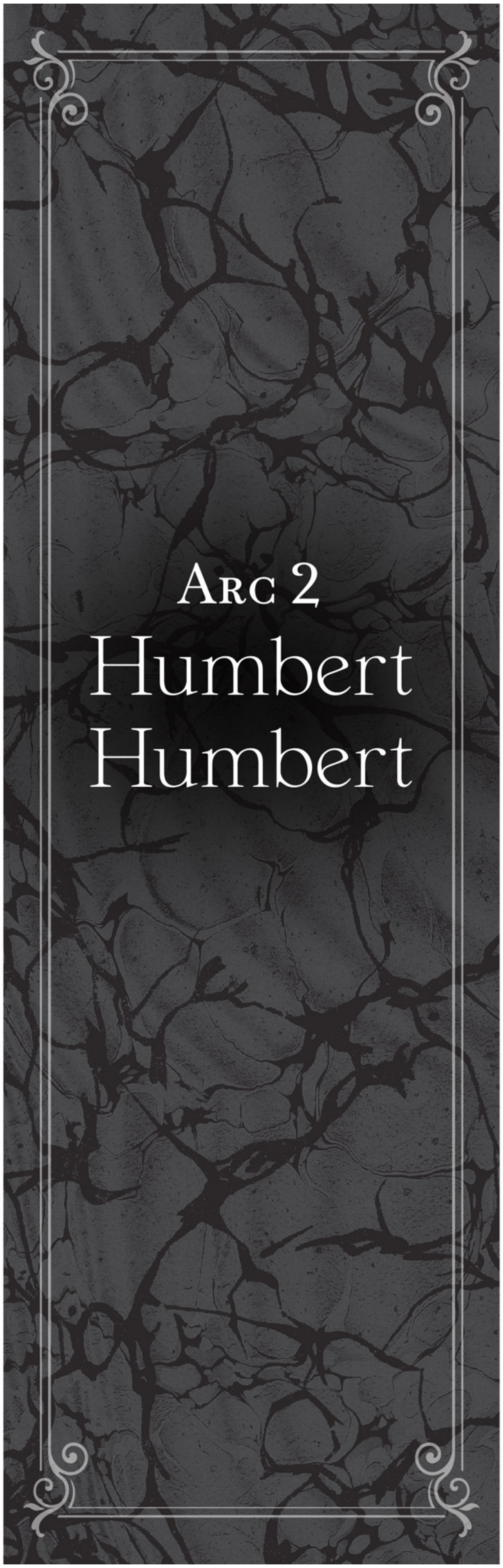

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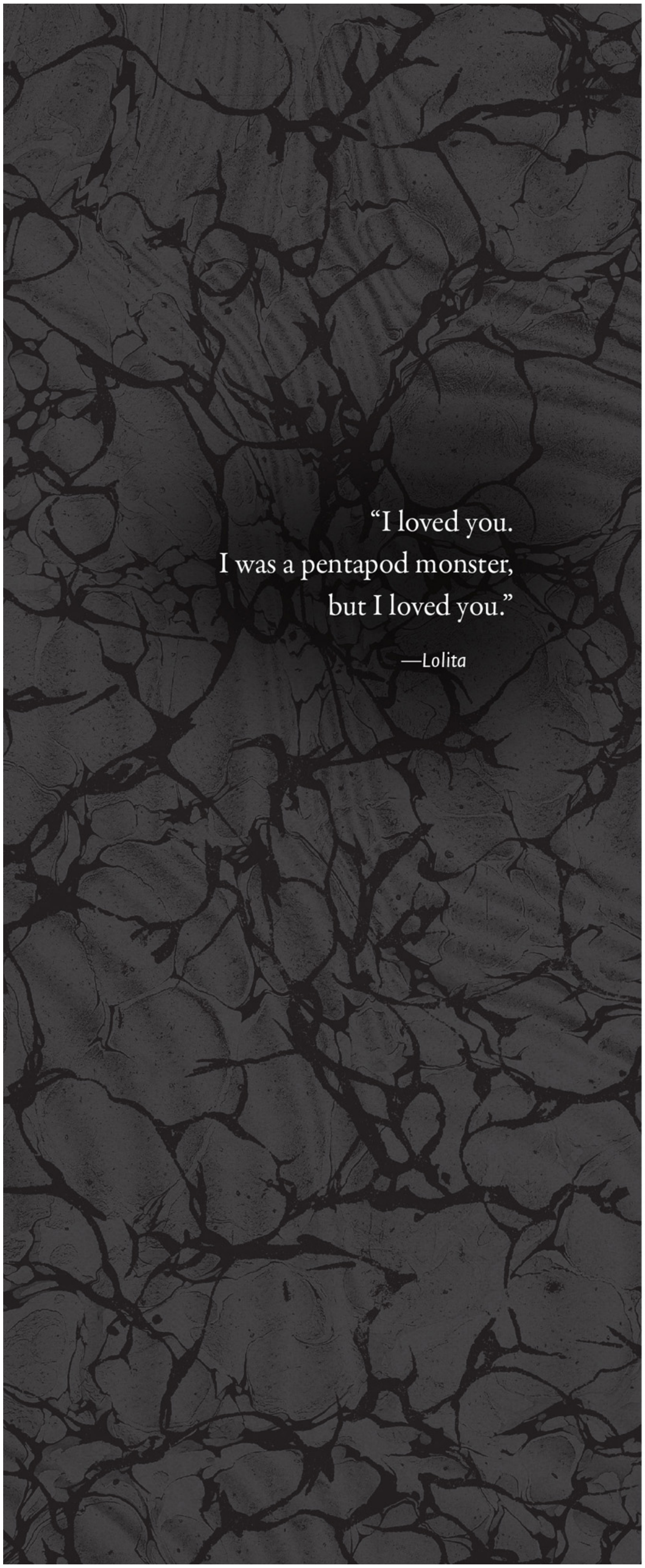


“I loved you.
I was a pentapod monster,
but I loved you.”

—*Lolita*

Chapter 1

ONCE TAO RAN HAD finally finished renovating his new home and was about to move in, a bunch of his coworkers and friends came to throw him a housewarming party.

The new place looked pretty good, even though it was nearly thirty years old. It was a commercial housing unit with a deceptively nice exterior.

“Deputy Tao, I’m telling you—you should put a vintage clock right here at the entrance, the kind that sticks out from the wall, like in a European train station. It would tell the time *and* add to the vibe. This corner here is way too dull; you can hang some plants or a terrarium or something. You’ve got to get a full set of refreshing rainforest-themed kitchenware for your kitchen…”

Lang Qiao was an interior design enthusiast—although all her knowledge came from home-decor magazines—and she was completely unaware of the effect her words were having on Tao Ran. From the moment she walked through the door, she’d been running around the apartment, strong-arming Tao Ran into design choices.

As she headed into the kitchen, she happened to see Luo Wenzhou picking up a pot of sauce with one hand. “Oh my god, Boss! It’s you!”

“Who else could it be? Your Deputy Tao? Do you *want* to eat a feast of plain noodles?” Luo Wenzhou gave her a look of disdain. “Move. If you’re not going to help, then get out of my way.”

Lang Qiao hurriedly retreated, then watched Luo Wenzhou pour the sauce over a plate of blanched vegetables. A pleasant aroma immediately wafted across the kitchen.

Swallowing, Lang Qiao reached out to nab a morsel, but Luo Wenzhou slapped her hand away as if he had eyes in the back of his head.

“If you can cook, how come you’re always running to the caf?” she asked.

“Well, what am I supposed to do?” Luo Wenzhou picked up a knife and quickly and neatly cut an onion into thin strips, which he threw into the bubbling curry chicken. “Make an entire feast at home, then enjoy it with my cat? Do you think I’m insane?”

Lang Qiao’s eyes lit up. “Oh, right! You have a cat! My dearest boss, will you please show me your kitty cat?”

“Enough nonsense.” Luo Wenzhou couldn’t stand Lang Qiao’s pestering any longer. He impatiently turned the flame down on the chicken, pulled out his phone, and opened his pet-cam app. “You can look for yourself. Although he might not be in his bed. Couldn’t you guys pick something else to worship? Why does it have to be a *cat*? Tacky!”

“I’ll do what I want! Cats bring wealth!” Lang Qiao accepted his phone reverently with both hands. As soon as the app connected, a huge cat face appeared on the screen.

Luo Yiguo stared eerily at the camera for a while; it wasn’t clear what he gleaned from it. Then Lord Kitty leapt onto the windowsill, still in clear sight, and treated the poor spider plant there quite inhumanely—or rather, infelinely. Luo Wenzhou watched him unleash a series of martial arts moves on the plant, clawing and biting it. In the end, the pot landed on the floor with a crashing sound, and both the bone-china pot and the plant itself suffered an unfortunate end.

Lang Qiao stared. This sure was a cool cat. Lang Qiao slowly handed Luo Wenzhou's phone back to him. "Um…my condolences?"

As the head of the house, Luo Wenzhou almost wanted to run away.

Tao Ran chose that moment to poke his head in. "Did Fei Du say when he was coming? Will he be able to find this place?"

Luo Wenzhou glanced out the kitchen window just in time to see a huge, garish SUV arriving below—the *other* "Yiguo" had arrived. This "Yiguo" was very tall, with a sharp tongue, and he couldn't be thrown out by the scruff of his neck. Luo Wenzhou's head started to ache; he regretted what he'd said that day at the graveyard. "His car's downstairs."

Local custom dictated that every housewarming guest bring the new homeowner kitchenware or a small appliance as a gift. Thinking of the weird-smelling coffee at the municipal bureau, Fei Du had bought Tao Ran a fully automatic espresso machine. The three-foot-tall cardboard box was quite heavy, so Lord Fei was, for once, doing manual labor—just for Tao Ran.

Fei Du carried the gargantuan thing to the elevator…only to find it on strike. He stood there staring at it in the company of several dog-walking old men incapable of climbing stairs. After a while, he belatedly realized something and got out his cell phone. "Ge, what floor do you live on?"

"The twelfth," Tao Ran chuckled. "But the elevator isn't working today, so why don't you get your steps in?"

Fei Du had no response. He glanced down at the large box, feeling like he'd stepped on a pile of steaming Luo Wenzhou.

Finally, the repairmen showed up, yawning. Apparently, it would be difficult to revive the elevator anytime soon. The old men who'd been waiting around lost their patience and dispersed. The only one left was the young but hardly muscle-bound Fei-zong.

The machine itself weighed twenty-five pounds, but the packaging brought it well over thirty. Fei Du was an able-bodied young man, and thirty-odd pounds wasn’t a huge deal to him, but the rectangular box had no handles. Climbing twelve floors carrying the box in his arms would be rather unsightly; the same went for carrying it on his back. Fei-zong thought of a few alternative poses but couldn’t reconcile any of them with his aesthetic standards.

Still, he was the one who’d purchased this burden. He’d have to carry it himself even if it rubbed a hole in his shirt. Fei Du stared at the cardboard box helplessly for a while, then decided, *To hell with it.* He grabbed the dirty box and hoisted it onto his spotless shoulder. But just as he was about to surrender to his fate and step into the stairwell, someone suddenly asked from behind him, “What floor are you going to? Do you need a hand?”

Fei Du turned around and saw two beauties: a woman and a child. The older beauty looked to be in her twenties; she was as pretty as a celebrity, and she held the hand of a girl who looked to be around ten. The child’s hair was half up, and she wore a cute floral dress. She slowly licked an ice-cream cone in her hand, studying Fei Du curiously.

He immediately put the box down and summoned enough elegance that he could have modeled in a fashion show at any moment. “Am I in the way?” he asked with a nod and a smile. “My apologies.”

“It’s all right, it’s all right. I wasn’t heading that way. That box just looked pretty heavy.” The woman hesitated, looking back at the elevator. “It’s such a hot day for the elevator to break on. What’s property management even doing? Why don’t you wait till it’s fixed? They could be done soon.”

As an experienced playboy, Lord Fei couldn’t have asked for a better excuse. He cheerfully forgot his reason for even making the trip and let the little girl sit on the box, then stood in the hallway, chatting cheerfully with the beautiful woman.

***

UPSTAIRS, TAO RAN WATCHED Luo Wenzhou scoop out the curry chicken, which had an unusual fragrance, then glanced at his watch. “It’s been five minutes. He should be here now. What’s going on with Fei Du? Is he riding a snail up the stairs?”

Having finished cooking, Luo Wenzhou methodically gave his underlings directions on plating the food. Opening the lid of a clay pot with a slow-simmering ham hock inside, he took the opportunity to make a jab at Fei Du. “I don’t know. Maybe he took root downstairs.” As he spoke, he grabbed a ladle and tasted the soup. It was fragrant enough, but it seemed to be missing something. “Have you got rock sugar?”

“No,” Tao Ran replied, putting on his shoes. “But I’m going downstairs to check on him; I can grab some while I’m down there. What kind do you need?”

Luo Wenzhou furrowed his brow. “What a spoiled young master. He needs to be carried just to get upstairs?”

Tao Ran smiled good-naturedly. As he was about to step out, Luo Wenzhou began to follow him with an ugly expression. “What are you doing?” Tao Ran asked, baffled.

“I’m going to buy rock sugar,” said Luo Wenzhou. “You don’t know which kind to get.”

Tao Ran nearly laughed from the ridiculousness. How many kinds could there be?

“What are you laughing at?” Luo Wenzhou demanded.

Tao Ran thought about it. “Well, you seem to be on much better terms with Xiao-Fei lately.”

Stepping into his slippers, Luo Wenzhou waved carelessly. “Who’s ‘on better terms with him’? I’m just not stooping to that bastard’s level.”

Downstairs, “that bastard” Fei-zong was showing off the casual, flirtatious elegance he’d spent many years cultivating to the beautiful woman, all while the elevator repairmen made a racket in the background.

This shameless display of the evil ways of the rich blinded the curry-scented Luo Wenzhou all the way over in the stairwell. He really couldn’t get used to Fei Du’s behavior. The young man did nothing important all day long; he was always either chatting or flirting. It was a good thing his family had money—if he ever found himself having to beg for money to live, no group of the homeless would ever accept him. Rather grumpy, Sergeant Luo walked over, a sarcastic remark already on the tip of his tongue…until he heard Tao Ran gasp and stand tall enough for a military drill formation right then and there.

“Ch—*ahem*, Chang Ning?” Tao Ran said, his voice trembling slightly.

The beautiful woman turned around. She froze, then laughed. “Tao Ran? What are you doing here?”

Fei Du and Luo Wenzhou both shut up, their gazes darting in unison between Tao Ran and the woman. Just from the simple greetings they’d exchanged, the others already detected a hint of…something.

Tao Ran’s ears had instantly turned bright red, and his mind left the cares of the mortal world—including his mortal friends—behind. He approached the woman, finding his limbs suddenly stiff and uncoordinated. Stumbling over his words, he began, “I-I’ll be living here from now on. I-I just moved in. What… What’re you…”

“Really? *I* live here!” Chang Ning smiled at him, revealing her dimples. “It’s almost like fate! See—I didn’t lie to you—this neighborhood’s right by the subway. It’s super convenient.”

At the word “fate,” Tao Ran initially lost himself, but then his brain forced him to remember that failed date. The resulting embarrassment made him stammer, “Yes…or, uh, no.” He cleared his throat. “I mean, I’m sorry I didn’t take you home that day…”

Sergeant Luo and Fei-zong, both forgotten, now realized who this woman was.

But knowing was one thing, and seeing her with their own eyes was another. They instinctively exchanged glances, both their emotions rather complicated. This man—the crush they’d fought over—was usually so calm, everyone’s safe harbor in a storm. But in the face of his own crush, their safe harbor had transformed into a pillar-like dumb straight man before everyone’s eyes.

The two longtime love rivals stood silently shoulder to shoulder, watching all this unfold. The only thing separating them was a hefty appliance.

Outside, the dense leaves on trees cast thick shadows on the ground. The heat was unbearable, and the cicadas screamed nonstop—all told, this really was a scene in which “two rivals sing amongst the green while a single straight stick ascends to the sky.”

The only person unaffected by all this was the little girl sitting on the box. After crunching through her ice-cream cone, she extended a little paw toward Fei Du. “Dagege, do you have a napkin?”

Three minutes later, Tao Ran finally managed to invite the girl of his dreams to his home. Chang Ning hesitated for a moment but then nodded. At that point, it was like Deputy Tao had passed an imperial exam—he was so elated he almost didn’t know what to do with himself. Having easily forgotten his two male guests, he led Chang Ning and the little girl upstairs.

Mocked to their faces by the bitter truth, the two men left behind stared at each other. “I’m not quite sure how I should feel right now,” Luo Wenzhou said.

Fei Du looked away, then nodded at the box by his feet like a boss would to a subordinate, motioning for the latecomer to carry it. Sticking his hands into his pockets, he sauntered off. Luo Wenzhou stared after him. He wasn’t sure whether it was just his imagination, but he had the distinct impression that Fei Du was acting a little too familiar with him.

In the end, though, Luo Wenzhou picked up the coffee machine without protest. His own body suffered the consequences of doing so; still, he scoffed at Fei Du's back. "You can't even carry something like this upstairs? Where's your stamina, young man?"

Fei Du turned and gazed down at him from a few steps up. "Want to put it to the test, Sergeant Luo?"

That left Luo Wenzhou speechless.

Fei Du didn't know whether the shock of the scene earlier was spurring him to set his sights on someone new, but he was delighted by Luo Wenzhou's expression. He studied Luo Wenzhou as the sergeant held the heavy appliance, and a mischievous little whim seized him. He stared into Luo Wenzhou's eyes. Then, suddenly, he took a step closer, both slightly pale irises reflecting a miniature version of the other man.

Luo Wenzhou's natural interest in men made him back up instinctively. He managed to set a foot on the next step down.

With a light chuckle, Fei Du used a single finger to wordlessly tap the coffee-machine box. The taps seemed to strike Luo Wenzhou directly in the chest with a vague, ambiguous suggestion. A jolt of electricity coursed up his spine, prompting him to break into a thin layer of hot sweat.

For his part, the instigator of the flirtatious gesture was quite satisfied to leave right after he made it. He continued up the stairs empty-handed.

That bastard!

***

IN A SINGLE TRIP DOWNSTAIRS, Tao Ran and Luo Wenzhou had managed to pick up a goddess and a CEO with no stamina. But *someone* wound up forgetting to get rock sugar, so the rock-sugar ham hock became granulated-sugar ham hock.

Tao Ran and Chang Ning, the goddess, had gone to high school together. Young love was like good poetry—hard to forget, even after many years. Both happened to be single now, and they'd been set up on a date by a mutual friend from their hometown. Since Chang Ning had been sent to her company's Yancheng location, she was staying temporarily with her aunt, who lived in Tao Ran's new building—practically fate.

When the new guests arrived, all the single young people loafing in Tao Ran's living room started to bubble with excitement, making Tao Ran's face and ears turn red.

Suddenly thinking of something to distract them with, Tao Ran pointed to Fei Du, who was joining in on the fun. "Hey—didn't you guys bring the banner? He's right here. Give it to him quickly."

Voicing her agreement loudly, Lang Qiao brought out a roll of bright red fabric. It unfurled with a whoosh, and the vibes in the living room transformed. In the banner's radiance, Tao Ran's living room seemed to glow with innovation and progress. Fei Du held his tongue.

The banner wasn't all. Once Lang Qiao had solemnly stuffed it into Fei Du's arms, she pulled out a red-and-gold certificate. "Comrade Fei Du, Deputy Lu said to give this to you. He also said that Sergeant Luo will deliver a few words on his behalf. And once we're fully done with Wang Hongliang's case, he'll hold a commendation conference. Sergeant Luo, are you doing it, or shall I do it for you?"

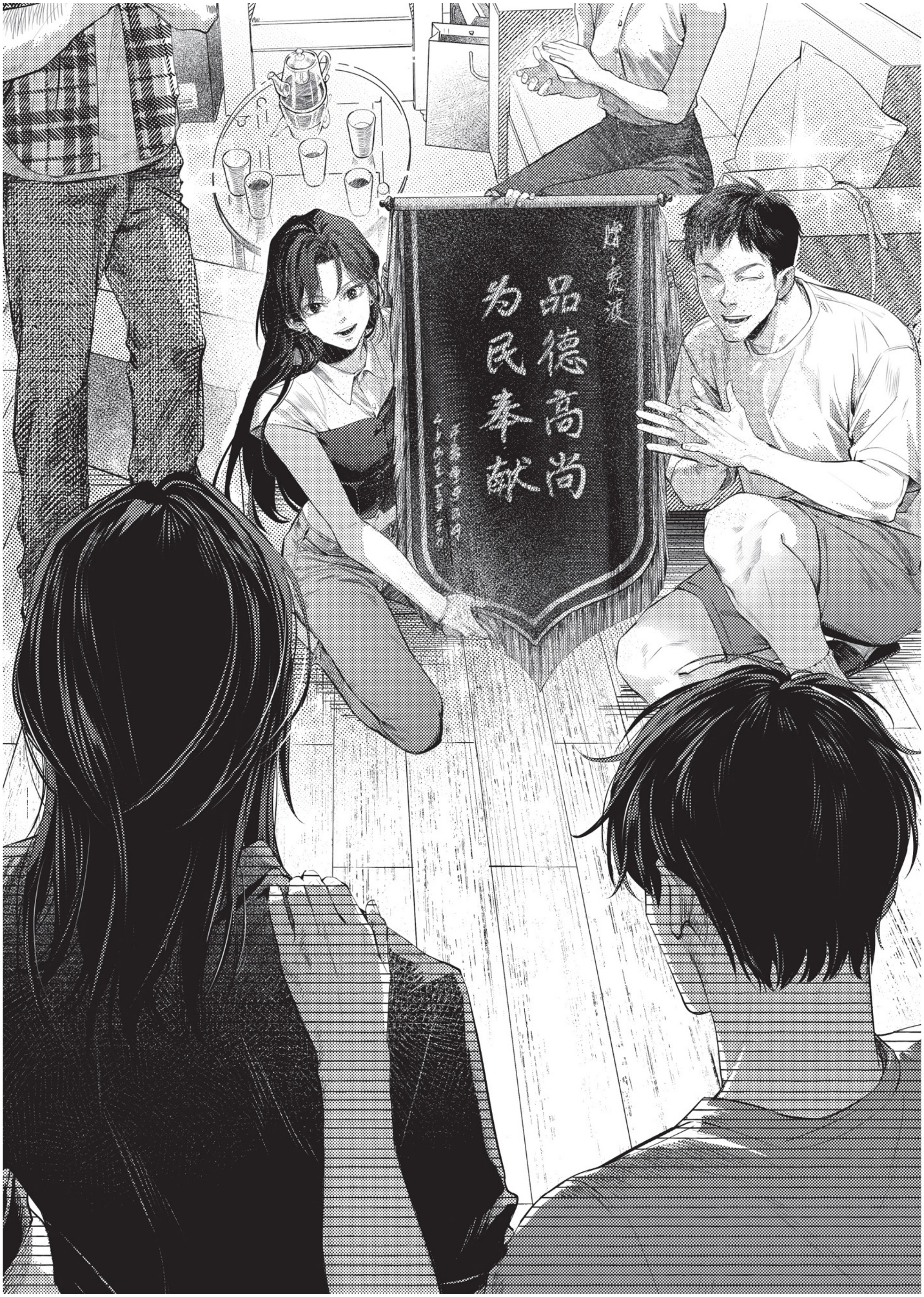
In the kitchen, Luo Wenzhou was currently fighting with various condiments and couldn't divide his attention. "What?!" he yelled over the sizzling sounds from the stove. “Tao Ran, how come your range hood suddenly stopped working? Did the power go out?”

Fearing that the pretty officer would give a long speech about the Core Socialist Values, Fei Du fled, ostensibly to check the power switch. “I’ll go take a look.”

Lang Qiao blinked. “A rich CEO knows how to check on the power?” she asked, her tone skeptical.

Of course he did. When Fei Du was young, he’d often spent time in Tao Ran’s small, plain rental apartments with worn-out secondhand furniture for company. Tao Ran had lived a frugal life; he fixed whatever he could, never letting Fei Du spend money on him. So, over time, Fei-zong had become quite a handyman.

The aging building’s electrical system hadn’t been replaced. It still used old-fashioned fuses instead of circuit breakers. Opening the fuse box, Fei Du detected a faint burnt smell—the fuse wire had melted. There was no way Tao Ran, who’d only just moved, would have a replacement on hand, so Fei Du had no choice but to head downstairs to find a hardware store.


曾·爱波
品德高尚
为民奉献

Before he left, the little girl who'd come with Chang Ning told him, "Dagege, I forgot to buy an exercise book. Can you take me to the supermarket?"

This little girl was called Chenchen, and she was the daughter of Chang Ning's aunt. Chenchen was ten, and after this summer, she'd be in sixth grade. Her parents weren't home, so she'd gone out with her cousin for food.

Fei Du led the girl downstairs. He quickly purchased what they needed, and afterward, bought two cream puffs from a store on the next street over. Sitting on a little stone bench nearby, they split their loot between them.

"Those adults are so loud," Chenchen observed in a mature tone. "Let's wait a bit before we go back upstairs."

Fei Du opened his mouth to tease her a bit, but then he furrowed his brow. Their stone bench was beside a long-since-dried-up lotus pond, and amid all the pond's mud and withered leaves stood a bronze statue. That statue was fairly abstract—it was hard to tell what it was supposed to be—but part of its surface was smooth and shiny, and could reflect the shape of a human, albeit twisted and distorted.

Just now, Fei Du had glanced up carelessly and seen a pair of eyes reflected in the statue.

Fei Du's heart jumped. He looked all around, his eyes following the shadows around the statue. No walls surrounded this old neighborhood. A few buildings were clustered together, and it wasn't clear where those property lines ended and the busy street began. There was a bus stop nearby; due to improper planning years ago, it encroached on the neighborhood compound, forcing people to line up right outside the bushes as groups came and went. The businesses on the neighboring streets were doing well; it was close to lunchtime now, and patrons were already waiting for seats outside the street-food stalls.

There were plenty of people around. Some were residents still in pajamas, some were passersby who had business on the outskirts of the neighborhood, some were drivers taking a shortcut through the area, and some were delivery drivers rushing to and fro…

The owner of those eyes had been very alert. They'd realized that Fei Du had noticed them and immediately melded silently with the crowd. Fei Du couldn't spot anything suspicious, but he quickly stood up and said to Chenchen, "Let's go home."

Chenchen, who had no sense of danger, let out a long, disappointed noise and licked the leftover whipped cream from her fingers. Then, after a moment's thought, she made her offer. "I still have some pocket money. You treated me to a cream puff just now—how about I get you back? I still want to try the matcha one."

Fei Du declined firmly. "Another day. Otherwise, you won't have room for lunch."

Chenchen was dragged away rather reluctantly. "I don't like eating," she mumbled. "There's a lot of things I don't like to eat."

"What a coincidence—same here. I also dislike a lot of foods," Fei Du replied frankly, his words making Chenchen pause. "But I'm an adult," he continued. "Adults buy their own food, so no one can say anything."

Chenchen stared at him, speechless. *Grown-ups really are* so *shameless!* Just then, she noticed the look on his face. Chenchen was just a preteen, but she could read his expression clearly: His brows were knit together and he had a cold, serious air.

Chenchen grabbed the hem of Fei Du's shirt instinctively. "What's wrong, Dagege?"

As they spoke, the pair passed by a residential building. From the corner of his eye, Fei Du saw that the first-floor stairwell window was open and jutted out at an angle. He silently shifted so that Chenchen was walking in front of him, then pretended to bend down to speak to her. As they passed the window, he looked up suddenly and without warning. As he expected, through the clear reflection on the window, he caught a pair of eyes following them like a shadow!

The observer wore a pair of sunglasses and a mask, their entire face snugly covered. Putting a hand on Chenchen's shoulder, Fei Du whipped his head around. In the same moment, about two hundred yards behind them, someone dove into the bushes in a panic and disappeared.

This time, Fei Du saw that the figure was hunched, with white hair. An old man?

Chenchen looked at Fei Du nervously. She didn't know what was going on. Fei Du's icy cold gaze shot out through the glasses on his nose as he surveyed the nearby crowd. "Does someone usually take you to school and pick you up?" he asked.

"Yes," said Chenchen. "When my parents are home, they drive me. When they aren't, Jiejie takes the subway with me. If she has work too, I just stay at school a little longer. There are teachers to watch us."

Fei Du nodded thoughtfully. "Have you ever run into a weird grandpa around here?"

Chenchen thought about it for a moment, then shook her head.

***

SHE AND FEI DU WALKED BACK INTO Tao Ran’s building quickly. Its old, light-gray walls would cut off the sightline of any gaze coming from the shadows.

After a long time, a hunched old man slowly walked out from behind a bus-stop sign. His face was obscured, and he wore a large pair of sunglasses. He used the cane he held to tap the road; he seemed to have impaired vision. The people around him all had earphones in, and most were scrolling on their phones. No one paid any attention to his faltering footsteps.

The dark lenses were his best protection. The sun’s rays might not pass through them, but they didn’t block his greedy gaze. Right now, that gaze passed through time and space, staring intently at the place where that little girl had been.

Light had seemed to float over her floral dress, and her crystal hair clip complemented her clean little face. She’d been the only bright thing he saw. The moment his eyes landed on her childish silhouette, she’d seemed to burn brightly, leaving clear, distinct contours on his retinas. He wanted to get closer, to touch; he almost couldn’t control himself. But a fearsome snake guarded the forbidden fruit. Thinking of the gaze of the young man next to the girl, the old man shrank fearfully into the shadows. Fright and desire twisted together into a unique apprehension that made him purse his dry lips. He fell backward heavily against the trunk of a tree. His chest heaved as his heart pounded in his chest. He was entirely entranced; he was like a man drowning, or one who'd drunk poison.

***

IN THE TIME THEY'D SPENT on their cream-puff outing, the elevator had been fixed. Fei Du pressed the button for the twelfth floor and entered the elevator with Chenchen.

"Gege, what happened?" Chenchen asked cautiously.

Fei Du didn't treat her like a child. "I saw someone very suspicious staring at you," he told her bluntly. "Remember, when you're alone with adults, be very careful."

For once, a grown-up was willing to speak to her like an equal. "I know. I'm not a first grader—I'll be graduating next year," Chenchen replied, subconsciously imitating the way adults spoke. "I keep my distance from strangers, I don't eat anything a stranger gives me, and if anyone asks me for help, I politely tell them to find the police… My teachers repeat those things every day. It's so annoying."

"You have to be even more careful of people who *aren't* strangers," said Fei Du. "Don't get in anyone's car, don't stay anywhere where you're alone with an adult—like right now, for example. Being with me is very unsafe for you. What if I'm a bad guy?"

"Huh?" Chenchen stared at this so-called "bad guy," wide-eyed. "But…you're Jiejie's friend."

“I’m your jiejie’s *friend’s* friend. Your jiejie didn’t know me before today. And even if I were a friend, she might just see me occasionally, and not really know if I’m a good person,” said Fei Du. “People you’re familiar with can be dangerous too, including your teachers. And including grannies and grandpas who look like they have trouble walking; they might be faking it. Understand?”

Taking in Fei Du’s speech about the dangers of the world, Chenchen shuddered. At that moment, the elevator reached the twelfth floor, and the metal doors slid open. “Faking it? Why?” she asked in a small voice. “Gege, I’m a little scared.”

“It’s good to be scared, because beautiful things are like porcelain.” Fei Du reached out to hold the elevator doors and motioned for Chenchen to get out first. “A cat on the loose inside the room doesn’t present the biggest danger to them.”

“Then what does?”

Looking into the girl’s eyes, Fei Du said quietly, “That the porcelain itself doesn’t know how delicate it is.”

Chapter 2

LUO WENZHOU WAS LEANING against the wall in front of the meter box, waiting for them, a cigarette between his lips.

"It took you two half a year to buy a fuse. What did you sneak off to eat?" he asked as he pulled out a flathead screwdriver and flashlight, setting them aside. "If you'd taken any longer, those fish in the freezer would've made a break for it."

Chenchen, still fearful after Fei Du's safety lesson, didn't say anything. She ran inside on her tiny legs, searching for a sense of security.

Fei Du took the screwdriver from Luo Wenzhou and opened the meter box, his movements smooth from experience. He removed the burnt-out fuse and twisted the old-fashioned fuse wire onto the two screws. Pulling the wire lightly to keep it taut, he cut it with a quick swipe of the screwdriver head, not even needing pliers. Then he tugged the replacement wire a few times to confirm that it was attached firmly before turning the electricity back on. A "beep" came from behind them as the fridge and air conditioner both revived with full health. The entire process had taken less than half a minute. Luo Wenzhou hadn't even had time to light his cigarette.

As Luo Wenzhou watched, it dawned on him that Fei Du was no longer a boy but a man.

The way the sergeant saw Fei Du, whom he'd known for years, wasn't consistent. When he fought with Fei Du, Luo Wenzhou felt that he was dangerous—he disregarded the law and had the money and means to do so. Fei Du could explode at any moment, and every time he opened his mouth, he said something that could earn him a beating. But when Fei Du wasn’t looking for a fight, Luo Wenzhou was always reminded of the thin boy curled up at the entrance of that house. He worried about Fei Du sometimes, and couldn’t help showing too much concern for him on occasion—untainted concern, like an older brother’s.

Yet now—perhaps because of that flirty, boundary-crossing stunt on the stairs—Luo Wenzhou’s conflicting pictures of Fei Du suddenly verged on merging. His biases and misconceptions were canceling each other out, settling into a sliver of objective clarity. Fei Du was neither dangerously antisocial nor a pitiful little boy. He was, first and foremost, a man, and a handsome one at that. He was sensible and tactful but shamelessly pretentious. The overall effect was reminiscent of a courtesan holding her pipa and half hiding her face, signaling *“Come sleep with me anytime.”*

Luo Wenzhou felt that if this man weren’t Fei Du but a stranger he’d met in passing on the street or in a bar, he would’ve daydreamed about him for some time.

But why the caveat…? Why “if this man weren’t Fei Du”?

Pondering that distracted Luo Wenzhou even when it came time to eat. Tao Ran’s dining table wasn’t huge, so a few of the dishes didn’t even fit on it; the guests just had to divvy up the food as it came out. Luo Wenzhou had already spooned a large piece of granulated-sugar ham hock onto the little plate by Fei Du’s hand when he remembered that ham hock qualified as meat from “below the knee.” The young master wouldn’t eat it.

Luo Wenzhou paused for a moment, but before he could say anything, Fei Du poked the ham hock lightly with his chopstick. He stared at the meat for a moment, brow furrowed, then picked it up and put it in his bowl with a disdainful expression. He looked like the staunch nationalist Luo Yiguo catching a whiff of imported cat food.

Luo Wenzhou stared at him. He should’ve known. “No meat from below the knee” was just bullshit this asshole had made up, like his “sore throat.”

All the guests had now arrived—including the electricity—so everyone sat at the table. Fei Du and Chang Ning, both extroverts and good conversationalists, integrated into the group quickly; they didn’t seem like outsiders at all. Lang Qiao had made the uncharacteristically fancy gesture of bringing two bottles of red wine, and she poured a glass for everyone except the minor. At that point, everyone enthusiastically congratulated Tao Ran on enlisting in the mortgage-slave army.

Lang Qiao, having astutely spotted Tao Ran’s enormous unrequited crush on Chang Ning, improvised an entire “Praise of Deputy Tao” litany right in front of her. It detailed everything from Tao Ran’s dedication to his job to his love of life and animals. She listed examples of the difficult battles he’d waged over the years against the public nuisance Sergeant Luo to protect the many *lower-ranking workers* out there. In the end, noticing Luo Wenzhou’s threatening smile, Lang Qiao abruptly pivoted and began spinning a tale about a beautiful woman from a reinforcement squad who had pursued Tao Ran. This alarmed Tao Ran so much that he hastily begged Lang Qiao to stop slandering him for no reason.

“Tao-ge is very patient,” Fei Du put in, entering the conversation at exactly the right moment. “When he has his own children, he’ll be a model father. I brought him a lot of trouble as a kid.”

Tao Ran flapped a hand at him, face and ears red. As Fei Du took a sip of his wine, Chang Ning glanced at him curiously.

"My mother passed away when I was young," Fei Du explained. "Tao-ge happened to be handling that case. Back then, my father didn't have time for me, but Tao-ge felt responsible, and he took care of me for many years. I was already a teenager, so even if I hadn't had anyone to take care of me, I wouldn't have starved to death, but I only learned what a meaningful life was when I was with Tao-ge. He might not treat himself with a lot of care, Jiejie, but he's really good at taking care of others. He thinks of everything."

Having heard all these sales pitches for Tao Ran, Chang Ning at least knew that he had made plenty of good friends. She couldn't help turning to smile at Tao Ran.

But Tao Ran's limit while drinking was, at best, a single glass, and he was now more than half a glass in. He was already dizzy, and with his crush staring at him, a smile curling on her lips, he nearly lost any ability to think; he was so flustered that he started to speak nonsense. "No, no, r-really… I wasn't the only one taking care of little Fei Du back then. Everyone cared about you, Xiao-Fei. After my shifu heard about you, he asked about you every so often… And what's his face—Wenzhou," Tao Ran continued, casually betraying his comrade. "He'd never admit it, but he secretly went to see you a bunch of times. And that video-game console, it was him who asked me—"

Luo Wenzhou swiftly kicked Tao Ran under the table, but it was already too late. That kick crushed what was left of Tao Ran's balance, and he fell sideways, knocking over a cardboard box of books and documents on the way down. Reference books, light reads, file folders, and notebooks fell haphazardly to the floor.

At their separate corners of the table, Fei Du and Luo Wenzhou both froze. Lang Qiao elbowed Luo Wenzhou, oblivious. “Really, Boss? You did that? Tough on the outside, soft on the inside—kind of embarrassing.”

Why are you announcing it, then?! Under Fei Du’s intense gaze, Luo Wenzhou coughed once, awkwardly, then stood up to tidy the cardboard box Tao Ran had knocked over. “Speaking nonsense when you’re just barely tipsy. Goof.” Picking up a yellowing notebook and shaking out the dust, Luo Wenzhou changed the subject awkwardly. “Hey, how come you’ve got our shifu’s old notebook?”

Even before he finished the question, a pencil portrait dropped from the notebook. It depicted a man with well-proportioned features; he looked gentle and refined, yet his gaze seemed to contain something dark and heavy.

The date on the page was from over twenty years ago, and there was an annotation in the corner: *Wu Guangchuan—the six girls’ corpses still haven’t been found.*

Lang Qiao wasn’t done teasing Luo Wenzhou; she wanted to prolong her victory. She and the rest of their coworkers surrounded Luo Wenzhou—but that was when they made eye contact with the portrait on the floor. The police system included specialized portrait artists, each more talented than the last; the artist behind this portrait, in contrast, had seemingly been a beginner. Still, the person in the portrait somehow seemed especially alive. It was like the artist had sketched this face in their head countless times and then, unable to bear it anymore, finally laid it on a sheet of paper.

“What’s that?” Lang Qiao asked curiously.

Now that Luo Wenzhou’s kick had sent him flying, Tao Ran had sobered up slightly. Realizing that he’d said something he shouldn’t have, he stood up—not without the help of the couch—and diverted everyone’s attention as he helped Luo Wenzhou tidy up. “The Lianhuashan case, right? The old man spent his whole life talking about it.”

Lianhuashan was on the northern outskirts of Yancheng. Years back, it had been a county seat under Yancheng’s jurisdiction; back then, it had been called Lianhuashan County. Now that the city had expanded, it had become one of Yancheng’s development zones.

A few yellowing photos were taped into the notebook alongside the portrait. But too much time had passed, and the tape had lost its stickiness. A single touch was all that was needed for the photos to start falling out. Some were blurry candids, and others were studio shots that were characteristic of their time—they all had backdrops of Dutch windmills and dramatic lighting. The girls’ smiles were all a little stiff, as though the photos had been taken with long exposure times. There were six photos in total.

Old photographs had an interesting quality. After dozens of years, they all faded to the same yellow. If the person in the photo looked happy, that yellowing lent the artifact a wistful, nostalgic quality; if, on the other hand, something unfortunate had befallen the photo’s subject, the yellowing seemed eerie and weighty. It was like the subject’s fury and resentment became part of the static photograph, as if they were hinting at something from the great beyond.

“Lao-Yang?” Lang Qiao asked. “How come he was looking into a case all the way out in Lianhuashan?”

“At that time, the municipal bureau’s policy was that officers under age thirty-five had to go to a grassroots unit for experience. They’d either go to a local station or get sent off to the counties. My shifu was sent to Lianhuashan, and he was there about six months.” Luo Wenzhou carefully picked the photos up by their edges and slipped them back into the notebook. “He hadn’t been there long when this case popped up. Er-Lang, you might never have heard about it. Even I hadn’t started school at that time.”

“At the beginning, a man reported a lost child.” Tao Ran flipped through the notebook. Aside from the photos and portrait, most of the notebook was full of writing. The old officer’s handwriting was beautiful, elegant, and powerful, as well as very shapely. On the page just before the photos was written the name *Guo Heng*; it had been underlined three times. “Right—Guo Heng was his name. His eleven-year-old daughter had gone missing. Her nickname was Feifei.”

Luo Wenzhou gave Tao Ran a look. “You’re wasted, and you still remember her name?”

“I listened to the old man tell this story so many times, I could recite it in my sleep.”

“How’d she go missing?” Chang Ning couldn’t help but ask curiously. She was usually busy with work; she rarely had time to even watch TV, let alone enjoy other forms of entertainment. Now, she’d been presented with a couple of police officers who could tell the story in person.

“Back then, parents didn’t look out for their kids the way they do now,” Tao Ran explained. “Eleven- or twelve-year-olds were considered old enough for parents to be hands-off. If they wanted to go somewhere, they’d just tell their family and then run off. Parents didn’t follow their kids everywhere. But this girl, Guo Fei, was very well-behaved. She went to school and came home at the same time every day. If she was five minutes late, she’d have a reason. Her family never had to worry about her studies. Nothing special happened the day she went missing. According to her classmates, she didn’t stay behind after school; she went home right on time, as usual. It was a fifteen-minute walk from the school to her home, but somewhere along the way, she disappeared.

“My shifu traced her steps dozens of times. There were no security cameras at the time, but there also weren’t any hiding spots on her way home. It was summer, so she went home when it was still light out, and plenty of people were around. Someone would typically have noticed *something* if a child her age was kidnapped on the street. But after conducting interview after interview, my shifu’s team came up empty. They searched the entire area around the school and didn’t find a single hair. Doesn’t Sherlock Holmes have that famous saying? ‘When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.’[2] So some people said that she’d been kidnapped by someone she knew—a friend or a relative, maybe—or that she’d run away from home.

“Her running away would probably have been the best-case scenario. She didn’t have much money on her, so she’d have returned in a day or two. Anyway, the police initially looked into people she had close relationships with: teachers, school staff, the Guos’ friends and relatives. They even looked at the owner of the stationery store she frequented and the local supermarket's cashiers… The police summoned *hundreds* of people for questioning, but they always came up empty." Tao Ran paused for a moment, then continued, "Just when they were reaching their wits' end, the girl's father, Guo Heng, suddenly got a call. No one spoke on the other end, but a little girl was screaming in agony. When his wife heard, she passed out immediately. The police used the phone number to locate the phone that placed the call, and it was in a booth in a very remote area."

"Weren't there cameras?" Lang Qiao asked, confused.

"Do you think the streets were full of security cameras back then?" Luo Wenzhou asked. "Besides, the phone booth was next to a garbage dump, and the workers there didn't even know it was still in use. They found a little blood next to the phone booth. It matched Guo Fei's blood type. At the time, though, there wasn't DNA testing, so they couldn't confirm that it was hers. And they never found useful fingerprints."

For a while, no one in the living room spoke. Eventually, Fei Du—who'd been silent for a long time—asked, "Was that the only call? Was there no extortion or ransom?"

"None," said Tao Ran. "After that call, the kidnapper never contacted the girl's family again."

Fei Du swirled his wine slowly and absently inhaled its fragrance as if it were a glass of Romanée-Conti rather than a dry red Lang Qiao had picked at random in the supermarket. "That's weird," he said. "It sounds like the kidnapper wasn't after the child and instead wanted to torment the parents. What did they do for a living?"

"Guo Heng taught junior high. His wife was a low-level government worker. By the standards of the time, they were pretty well-off, but they were still just an ordinary family who survived on a basic monthly salary—definitely not rich. Both her parents were well-educated, sensible, and not very ambitious. They had good relationships with their coworkers—there didn't seem to be any conflict there. And there were no extramarital affairs."

An ordinary family with ordinary parents and an ordinary daughter… Guo Fei hadn't even been a particularly beautiful girl. The entire family lived a conventional, straitlaced life, as plain and unremarkable as a standard hotel room. Even digging as hard as they did, the police couldn't find anything notable. "Flies won't sting an uncracked egg," as the saying went, but the police had gone through all of the Guo family's relations—they'd even taken a magnifying glass to some rather personal matters—and in the end, they concluded that the family was as crack-free as an egg could be.

Time went on, and they never heard from the kidnapper again. Both the police and the girl's family knew that the odds of getting her back were slim. If she was lucky, she had been sold off somewhere remote, but it was more likely that she was already dead.

The police had no idea why Guo Fei had been chosen. It was like the mysterious kidnapper had simply tossed a die into the street and taken whomever it fell closest to. It was senseless.

"So…did the same thing happen to those other five kids?" Lang Qiao asked.

"Similar things," Tao Ran confirmed. "When no leads were left in Guo Fei's case, it went cold—there was nothing else they could do. Later, my shifu returned to the city. While he was on Xitai District Bureau's criminal investigation team, another child was kidnapped there—also a girl of eleven or twelve who disappeared on her way home from school, without the kidnapper leaving any message. And scariest of all, a couple of days after she disappeared, her family likewise received a call on which they heard a crying child. My shifu immediately realized that something was very wrong and reported the situation to the higher-ups. When the Xitai District Bureau's director escalated it to the municipal bureau, it turned out that in the whole of Yancheng—including all the districts and counties within its jurisdiction—there had been a total of six similar child kidnappings."

"Seven, actually," said Luo Wenzhou. "The last girl survived. At that point, the municipal bureau chose a few people from each area and formed a special investigation team. That was how Lao-Yang ended up at the municipal bureau—but after several rounds of investigation, the team was still coming up empty-handed. There was no connection between the kidnapped girls, except…" A sudden thought seemed to come to Luo Wenzhou, and he glanced at Chenchen, who was listening to the whole story with rapt attention. He paused, then abruptly changed the end of his sentence. "Except that the methods used were all the same."

"When Guo Fei's father heard that, he took a long-term unpaid leave of absence from work and came all the way into the city. He wanted to stay until the team solved the case and gave him answers, but in the end, he was disappointed." Tao Ran carefully placed the old officer's notebook back in the box. "Eventually, the team dissolved. The only people who still cared about the case were the victims' families and my shifu, who'd first handled it.

"Half a year later, Guo Heng suddenly came to find my shifu. He said he'd found a suspect. A teacher named Wu Guangchuan—the guy in the portrait. Wu Guangchuan was a teacher at Brocade Junior High, one of the earliest private junior highs. It was a boarding school that accepted students from the entire city. It was expensive, but the education was good. Plenty of parents from farther-flung areas thought that their local junior highs weren't up to snuff and sent their kids to Brocade instead. At the time Guo Fei went missing, Wu Guangchuan was on the team sent to Lianhuashan to recruit students."

Chang Ning held her breath. "Well…was it him?"

"Wu Guangchuan was thirty-six that year. He was divorced and lived alone, so it was a possibility that he'd committed the crime. Lao-Yang went to investigate him privately once—he even used some illegal methods—but he never found anything. Wu Guangchuan was even-tempered and had a good reputation. Everyone said he was a good man. He wasn't antisocial, he worked with kids, he'd never done anything that crossed a line, and he wasn't nursing any grudges against the victims' parents. Lao-Yang followed him for a while and really didn't think it was him. But it was like Guo Heng was possessed. He swore on his life that Wu Guangchuan was the kidnapper. Later, when Lao-Yang stopped following Wu Guangchuan around, Guo Heng went to find Wu Guangchuan himself and stabbed him."

Lang Qiao let out a soft exclamation. "Did he die?!"

"Yes," Luo Wenzhou said. "He was already dead when he arrived at the hospital. And the police found the seventh kidnapped girl in his basement, in addition to the six previous girls' clothes. The garments had been cut into strips, but there were blood stains on them that matched the victims' blood types. That's how the case was solved. But they never found the first six girls, dead or alive, and they could no longer question the suspect.” He stood and stretched. “Guo Heng was charged with first-degree murder and found guilty. Lao-Yang never let that go. He thought that his own error in judgment had resulted in the tragedy. He never stopped talking about it for the rest of his life. All right—enough. Let’s eat.”

The gathering at Tao Ran’s apartment lasted until that afternoon, at which point those who’d arrived via taxi or subway left. The guests who’d driven themselves stayed behind to help Tao Ran unpack while they sobered up. Chang Ning and Chenchen went home too. A few more drinks were forced onto Tao Ran, and when he went to do the dishes, he ended up dropping a plate. At that point, Luo Wenzhou chased him away. At least it was good luck—the “pieces” of such a shattered plate were said to bring “peace.”

Sergeant Luo quickly washed a whole stack of plates and bowls. When he returned to the living room, he saw Fei Du flipping through the old officer’s notebook idly. He had his back to Luo Wenzhou, but he apparently had eyeballs on the back of his head, because he asked, “You wanted to say that, in addition to the method in which the lost girls were kidnapped, there was another similarity between them. It was their clothes, right?”

Leaning against the wall, Luo Wenzhou burst out laughing. “How did you know? Are you the murderer reincarnated?”

“You looked at Chenchen and swallowed your words. She was wearing a floral dress today.” Fei Du turned around. “The clothes found in Wu Guangchuan’s basement—were they all dresses with a floral print?”

Luo Wenzhou glanced at him, remembered the embarrassing gaming console, and awkwardly avoided Fei Du’s gaze. “Yes.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“There wasn’t anything to say. You can teach a child to be wary of strangers, to be more alert, but you can’t let her be afraid to wear a floral dress. Otherwise, what’s the point of us police?”

“Mm.” Fei Du nodded lightly. “You’re right, Sergeant Luo.”

When Luo Wenzhou finally heard something nice come out of Fei Du’s mouth, he was suddenly afraid. A second later, his intuition proved correct.

“Other than the little bouquets and the console, what else was there…?” Fei Du asked quietly.

Chapter 3

THE GUESTS HAD ALL LEFT, and the drunken Tao Ran was now off dreaming in another dimension. The faint scent of alcohol permeated the well-lit living room—sour, sweet, sticky, and a little cloying. Fei Du turned off the air conditioning, opened the windows, and used the brand-new coffee machine to make himself a shot of espresso. The espresso sat at the corner of the table, emanating heat and a heavy scent.

A summer breeze blew past Luo Wenzhou's face. He shook the water from his hands, pressed the cold base of his palm to his forehead, and sighed, exasperated. "Could you be a little more subtle, young man? We all learn as children in the Young Pioneers[3] to do good deeds without seeking credit. If you just put everything out in the open like that, where's the beauty?"

Fei Du didn't respond. It looked like he had frozen over; his pretentions seemed to have slipped and given way to true seriousness. Looking at him, it struck Luo Wenzhou that he wasn't the only one feeling awkward. With that eidetic memory of his, Fei-zong must still remember that time when he'd played the PSP throughout his visit to the municipal bureau while mouthing off to Luo Wenzhou.

Luo Wenzhou made a good-faith attempt to picture himself in Fei Du's shoes; he felt all his hair stand on end, and his gaze quickly took on a "hackles raised" filter. Looking at Fei-zong again, Luo Wenzhou sensed that every inch of him, from his pursed lips and the unnatural way his fingers dug into his side to the avoidant gaze behind his glasses, looked desperately uncomfortable.

When a person felt awkward, whatever they said or did often made things worse. On the other hand, the most immediate cure was always to realize that the other party felt the same way.

Luo Wenzhou smiled and slowly put his hand in his pocket. He tilted his head down and put a cigarette in his mouth, his eyes flicking downward, then up to take a good look at Fei Du. "What? You finally realized the person you've been taking jabs at all these years is actually a good guy?" Since his mouth was occupied by the cigarette, his voice came out a little nasal. "Don't worry, baby. Don't be nervous. A model citizen like myself would never demand that someone casually pay him back with their body."

Fei Du's features were like a hand-drawn mask, a defense as strong as a steel wall. He had near-perfect control of his expression and body language, especially when he was nervous, and would never let the slightest hint of emotion through. Compared to him, Zhao Haochang—who'd told nothing but lies—was as guileless as they came.

Not responding to Luo Wenzhou's half jokes, Fei Du eventually picked up the little cup of espresso. A thin layer of oil floated on top, and small ripples cut across the surface of the beverage as Fei Du moved. He didn't add any sugar, as though he'd lost his sense of taste. He drank most of it in silence.

He'd had a few drinks earlier, and hadn't really eaten much, so he was pretty much running on empty. The alcohol and caffeine instantly combined into a blood-pressure booster that induced Fei Du's heart to pump a deluge of blood into his veins. His heart's suddenly rapid and uneven pounding made Fei Du slightly sick; cold sweat covered his palms.

"Don't drink that," Luo Wenzhou warned him automatically.

Fei Du’s palm cradled the warm ceramic mug. The corners of his lips lifted, and he responded with an empty smile. “It’s true that I’ve turned out all right for someone who’s constantly ready to take out a hit on his own father. That’s all thanks to your years of care, Sergeant Luo.”

His words felt inexplicably terse to Luo Wenzhou. Before he could fully untangle that, Fei Du downed the rest of his espresso in one go. Perhaps it was too bitter for him; his brow furrowed, and he tipped his head back, creating a sharply curved arc from his chin to his neck.

Fei Du set the cup down, nodded, and turned to leave. “I’m going to head out. Say goodbye to Tao Ran for me.”

“Hey—don’t drink and drive,” Luo Wenzhou reminded him almost instinctively.

Fei Du ignored him.

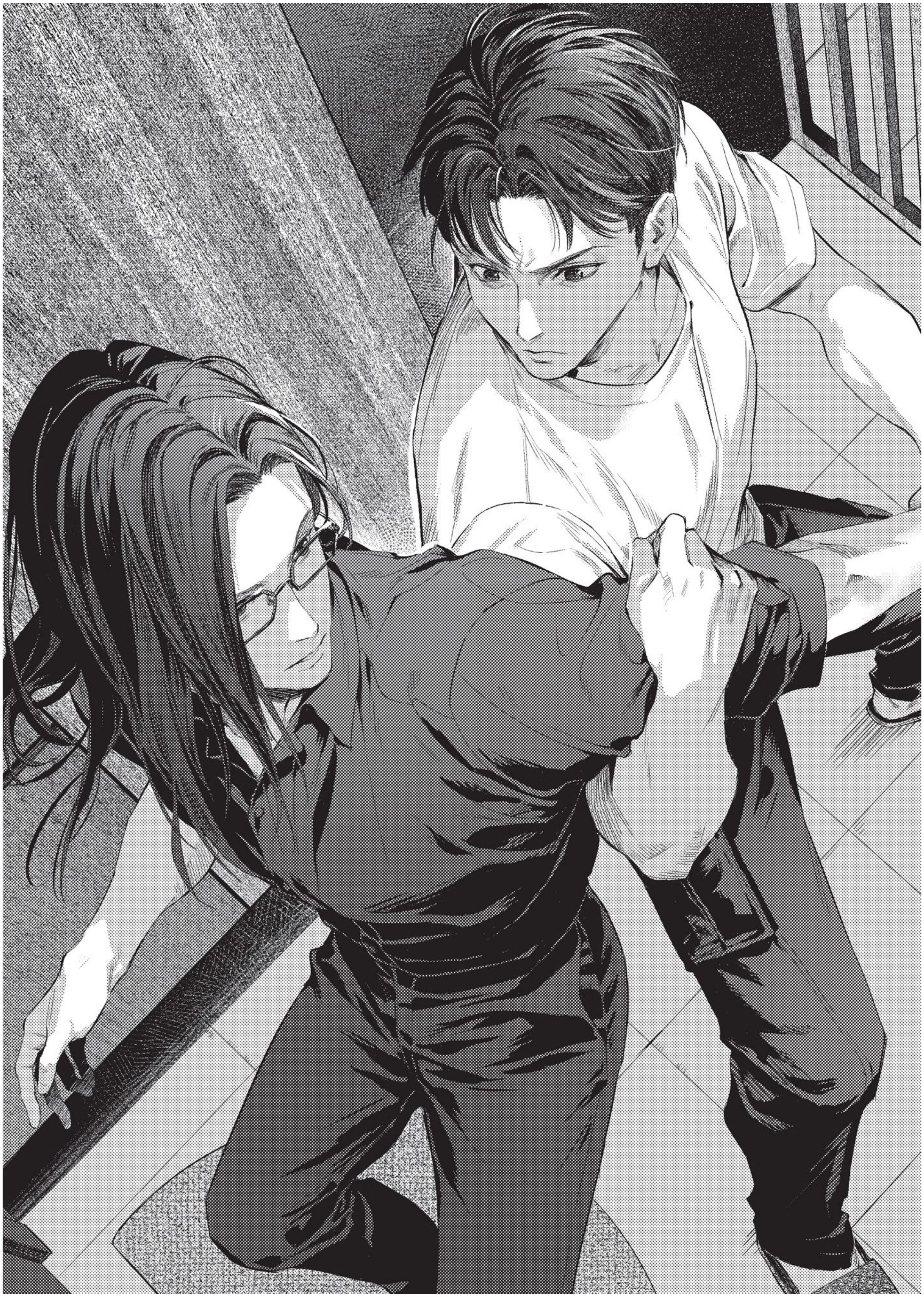
“Did you hear me?” Luo Wenzhou pressed.

Fei Du reached for the door with a blank expression. It didn’t seem like he had.

His warning having gone unheeded twice, Luo Wenzhou was forced to take matters into his own hands. He grabbed Fei Du’s arm, pulled it behind him skillfully, and held it with Fei Du’s hand at the small of his back, the way he would have while arresting a criminal. Then he yanked him away from the door.

Fei Du stared at him in silence.

“You just don’t listen.” Ignoring Fei Du’s shocked gaze, Luo Wenzhou pressed one hand down on the back of his neck and, with the other hand still holding Fei Du’s elbow, escorted him to the lounge chair three steps away. “Sit down. You can take a nap, or I can call you a driver.”



Fei Du struggled out of his grasp. His speech sped up as he retorted, “Sergeant Luo, can you please try to evolve from a Neanderthal to a civilized human?”

Luo Wenzhou ignored him. He slid the hand on the nape of Fei Du’s neck a few inches forward until a finger landed on Fei Du’s carotid artery. “You’re not feeling great, are you? I think I read somewhere that coffee and alcohol don’t mix.”

Once again, Fei Du was silent.

Luo Wenzhou looked at him and sighed. “That’s just like you. You can’t handle people being good to you *or* mistreating you. You’re harder to serve than Empress Dowager Cixi.”

“My apologies… I wasn’t aware that you’d served Her Majesty,” Fei Du said dryly.

Luo Wenzhou flicked the side of Fei Du’s neck, then picked up his phone and went outside to call a driver.

Tao Ran was completely unaware of the treacherous quarrel happening under his own roof. A few glasses of wine had incapacitated him, and he didn’t get up until the light of the setting sun had thoroughly saturated the ground. That was when he rose, completely parched.

As he expected, all his guests had already left. Before leaving, though, they had politely cleaned up his apartment, which had been in a sad state.

In his new home, Tao Ran washed his face, then spotted two notes on the fridge. One was from Luo Wenzhou, telling him that the leftovers were in the fridge, and that he should reheat them when he got up. The other was from Fei Du, and it was rather long. Tao Ran had to rub his eyes for a while before he could clearly read what it said.

Fei Du had written that when he took Chenchen to buy her exercise book, he'd felt like someone was following them. It hadn't been clear whether that person was actually targeting Chenchen, or Fei Du was just being anxious. Just in case, though, he'd asked that Tao Ran visit Unit 1101 to see Chenchen's parents and remind them to monitor their child's safety during the summer break. He also reminded Tao Ran to bring a little something along and thank the beauty who'd blessed his new place with her presence.

Those busybodies. They'd even managed to learn the girl's unit number. Tao Ran burst into laughter.

A second later, though, he reread Fei Du's description of the suspected stalker, and his smile gradually froze. His gaze drifted out the window. Abundant vegetation grew in this old neighborhood, and the shrubbery was interspersed with dense conifers. From upstairs, it was impossible to see much of anything. It seemed quiet and peaceful.

Tao Ran walked to the little cabinet and flipped through the old police officer's notebook. On the inside cover was an old ID photo that showed the owner when he was younger. He'd had a buzz cut and a square face, and he stared into the camera with a solemn expression. Next to the photo, his name—Yang Zhengfeng—was written in a lively, elaborate script.

On the pages labeled "Lianhuashan Serial Kidnapping Case," the title had been circled in red. Tao Ran knew that meant that to his shifu, the case had never ended. The pages held notes from when Yang Zhengfeng had illegally followed Wu Guangchuan, eavesdropping on his conversations. That had gone on for half a month, and every day, Tao Ran's shifu had just written *Nothing to note.*

In the middle of the page was a row of text: *His colleagues have verified that Wu Guangchuan stayed in the hospital for two days due to a severe cold while recruiting students in Lianhuashan. That was when the victim, Guo Fei, went missing. That's also been confirmed by the hospital. It is unclear when Wu Guangchuan could have committed the crime.*

Tao Ran poured himself a warm cup of water, slowly getting his thoughts in order. Apparently, Wu Guangchuan had been over six feet tall, making him quite a large man. A little girl would have had to look up to see his face. In their teenage years, children began to go through puberty, becoming more aware of, and more sensitive toward, gender and sexual differences. An unfamiliar man, even a teacher, would probably need to interact with a girl frequently over a long period of time to gain her trust. Had Wu Guangchuan had the time and opportunity to do so during his hospital stay?

Deep in thought, Tao Ran lost his grip on the notebook. It fell shut, and a little note slid out from the back pages. It was in Tao Ran's own writing. He'd written down a radio channel, followed by the words *Midnight, Zero Degree Reading*.

The old officer Yang Zhengfeng had been stabbed to death by a wanted criminal three years ago. Prior to that, he'd risen through the ranks as he got older, and he already transitioned away from his role as a frontline criminal investigation officer to a managerial position quite a few years before his death. Back then, Luo Wenzhou had heard through the grapevine that Yang Zhangfeng was about to be promoted to deputy director of the municipal bureau, and they'd planned on milking a fat meal from the old man.

Their shifu hadn't even been killed during a shift. He'd taken two weeks off to see his child off to an out-of-town university, and upon his return home, he intended, perhaps, to spend the last day of his vacation as a stay-at-home husband. He'd set off to the local market bright and early. While walking by an underpass, he'd seen an apparently unstable homeless person who looked very anxious, glaring fiercely at anyone who dared look at him for a second too long. Yang Zhengfeng sensed from the man's movements that he was getting ready to attack somebody, so he kept an eye on the man. When he got a better look, he recognized the homeless man as a highly wanted criminal who was on the run after stabbing his next-door neighbors, a family of four.

The suspect was clearly in an unstable state, so Yang Zhengfeng didn't dare act rashly—he surreptitiously contacted a colleague instead. Unfortunately, an old lady happened to walk past them with her dog. Perhaps sensing danger, the puppy barked wildly at the suspect, alarming him; the suspect shouted, pulled a knife out of nowhere, and ran at the old woman. Yang Zhengfeng was forced to intervene, and the deranged man stabbed him more than a dozen times.

Tao Ran had been the officer on duty that day, so he arrived at the scene first, and he just barely had a chance to speak to Yang-lao one last time. Strangely, Yang Zhengfeng hadn't used his final words to ask whether the culprit had been caught, or to request that Tao Ran care for his wife and kid. Instead, he grabbed Tao Ran's hand and kept repeating, "Tune in to… eighty-eight point six…at five after twelve… Eighty-eight point six…"

That was a local radio channel—88.6 FM. A program called "Zero Degree Reading" had run every night at five minutes past midnight. That program had eventually stopped airing, evolving into a niche phone app that steadily played a variety of audiobooks every day, their contents invariably boring. He'd once mentioned it to Fei Du, who'd joked that the app would be a great cure for insomnia.

Tao Ran often had to work late shifts, so he didn't have a regular sleep schedule. But when he occasionally had trouble falling asleep, he'd listen to one of those weird audiobooks. Yet he'd never noticed anything abnormal about the radio program or the app beyond their soporific effects. He'd often suspected that he misunderstood his shifu's last words, but now he happened to notice the username "The Reciter."

Grabbing his almost-dead phone, Tao Ran opened the Zero Degree Reading app. He tapped a review he'd saved for *The Red and the Black*; the author of the review was "The Reciter." The first sentence read, *"Then who will eat at the same table as me?" That question lies at the very core of the character.*

Coincidentally, the culprit in the May twentieth case had been Zhao Haochang. Because of his connection to the Zhang family, Zhao Haochang had received a great opportunity that should've gone to one of his colleagues, coming to lead the Fei Corporation's team of legal counsel. That opportunity had come with a promotion to tier-two partner, and on the day Zhao Haochang went to the Fei Corporation to sign the contract, he stole Fei Du's fountain pen to commemorate the event. The phrase Zhao Haochang had labeled the pen with was *who will eat at the same table as me?*

It was too eerie a coincidence, but Tao Ran couldn't tell anyone that. They would say that he'd been involved in the case for too long and was starting to see it in everything. The problem was that this wasn't the first time Tao Ran had experienced such déjà vu involving The Reciter.

When Tao Ran's shifu had passed away, clutching his hand, had he really just brought up a boring reading program? Maybe Tao Ran had heard him wrong and was just further deluding himself that something strange was going on with Zero Degree Reading. Maybe his paranoia had gotten to the point that he now over-analyzed every little coincidence.

Tao Ran had been a police officer for over seven years; he knew that situations like that were common. If a person harbored enough suspicions, even their memories could lie to them. Plenty of people who'd witnessed a violent crime were afterward unable to say whether the culprit had been male or female, tall or short. Over the years, Tao Ran had flipped through the old officer's notebook countless times, trying to find any clue at all that would help him decipher his shifu's last words. He'd never found such a clue, although he could now recite the notebook from memory.

Tao Ran sighed, shaking his head self-deprecatingly. Maybe he needed to go talk to their workplace therapist.

Suddenly, an update notification appeared in the upper-right corner of the app. Tao Ran took a half-hearted glance, and then his eyes widened. The update was titled *Wanderer, have you found your lost pearl?—rereading* Lolita.[4] *Submitted by The Reciter.*

Chapter 4

THE HOUSE WAS TOO BIG. The few living beings inside could not fill the whole space; on the contrary, it was full of death's oppressive scent. That was a smell that not even sunlight and fresh flowers could chase away.

He stood in the foyer, hesitant. This was technically his home, but every time he set foot in this spotless foyer and faced the sunlight streaming in through the floor-to-ceiling windows, he felt fear in his heart.

Suddenly, faint music floated down the stairs, a lady's melodious voice singing a repeated refrain. He froze for a second, as though he knew exactly what was about to happen, then slowly stepped forward. The sunlight illuminating him immediately grew strange—cold and damp—not like sunlight at all. It felt more like wind in a thunderstorm as it blew against his forearm, which his summer school uniform didn't cover. Goosebumps erupted all over his skin.

As he climbed the stairs to the second floor, the music became clearer and clearer. The familiar tune stuck like a fishbone in his throat, making it difficult to breathe. He stopped suddenly, wanting to run away, but when he looked back, everything behind him had melted into darkness. It was as though the entire situation was preset, predetermined. There was only one road, one direction.

The darkness pressed into him on all sides. It forced him up the narrow staircase and compelled him to open that door. There was a boom, and he felt like something had exploded right next to his ear.

He looked down and saw the woman on the floor.

Her neck was at an unnatural angle, her body already turning a harsh blue. Her eyes were still open as if, despite her body's death, her soul was still alive. She stared straight at him through those fixed, lifeless eyeballs. Two lines of blood trailing downward from the corners of her eyes, she asked coldly, "Why didn't you save me?"

His breathing quickened, and he scrambled backward, but the woman stood up, swaying as she pointed at him with a finger mottled with livor mortis.

"You're so smart. You knew everything. Why did you avoid me? Why didn't you save me?"

Almost as if it was alive, the sweeping darkness caught her hand. That darkness mercilessly swallowed her whole as she screamed and questioned him. She struggled to reach him, but the blackness continued to pull her in. As he listened to her scream, he instinctively took that ice-cold, mottled hand, feeling like he was falling. All of a sudden, he felt something grab him from behind. His back pressed against a warm, firm body, and a pair of arms encircled him, hands covering his eyes.

From those slender fingers, he caught the faint scent of cigarette smoke. Then, between those fingers, a sliver of light exploded—and Fei Du woke with a start.

Cracking his stiff neck, he realized he was sitting in his study. A dull project proposal was propped open in his lap. He'd fallen asleep halfway through it and then had a suffocating nightmare—perhaps because of the way he was sitting, which had given him a crick in his neck.

It was the afternoon. A cold, humid breeze blew in through the window, promising a heavy downpour. The booming sound in his dream, and the sudden flash of light, had actually been thunder and lightning. Next to him, his phone kept ringing, showing three missed calls—no wonder he'd dreamt of that song.

Rising to close the window, Fei Du also picked up his phone. "Hello?"

Zhang Donglai's loud voice punched him in the ear. "Lord Fei, it's the middle of the day! Whose embrace are you languishing in right now? I called you so many times, and you didn't pick up!"

"The thunder was too loud for me to hear it." Fei Du's head felt a little heavy. He rubbed his brow. "What's up?"

"' The wind's strong, the rain's heavy, the sun's out,'[5] babe, come out and have some fun!"

Fei Du reached the window, feeling as though he could practically have wrung water out of the humid air. The plants he kept near the window all hung limply. "In this weather?" he said impatiently. "Where?"

"There's a new off-road racetrack at the Xiling Ecological Park. It's cool as fuck, and there's a Track of Death that only opens in bad weather. The harder it rains, the more exciting it is. How does that saying go? 'Let the storm rage harder'!"[6]

Hearing that, Fei Du practically felt mud splashing into his ears. "Are you trying to die?" he asked, his expression cold.

"Do you hear yourself? What an old-man thing to say. Where's the liveliness a modern youth like you should possess? What do we have in life beyond eating and seeing things? Living on the edge for a bit of fun!" Zhang Donglai retorted confidently. "If you don't want to drive, just come hang out. I'm telling you, this racetrack has a club, and they invited a little troupe of artists. They've got all kinds of beauties: gorgeous girls with straight black hair… Even artistic, intellectual types like violinists. They're not the usual tacky bimbos; they're right up your alley. It's a rare opportunity, so get your ass over here! Don't stay hung up on that old man at home—he's got a girlfriend now anyway, right?"

"You're well-informed," Fei Du snorted. As a CEO who'd practically grown up in a greenhouse, he didn't want to risk his life in the rain like an idiot. "Actually, I'm…"

That was when he glimpsed the reflection of his dark study in the window he leaned beside, and for some reason, remembered his disorienting dream…as well as the hands that had faintly smelled of tobacco.

More than a month had already passed since Tao Ran's housewarming. Fei Du used to go in and harass the officer every few days, but now he wouldn't even call him—firstly because he knew that Tao Ran liked someone, and couldn't be bothered too often, and secondly because Fei Du felt completely unsettled every time he looked at that damn console.

Today was worse than usual; nightmares were haunting him.

"All right," Fei Du said, changing his mind at the last minute. "Send me the address."

***

THE END OF JULY usually marked the end of Yancheng's rainy season. This year, however, the continual rainfall showed no signs of stopping. Instead, it seemed to get worse.

Two hours after Luo Wenzhou clocked out for the day, he returned to work. Parking his car by the bureau entrance, he ran into the building with only his hood for a shield.

"Sergeant Luo! Second floor meeting room! Hurry!"

Luo Wenzhou shook out his wet jacket, revealing three bloody scratch marks on the back of his hand, and dashed up the stairs two at a time. "What's going on?"

"I don't know. I just got here too." Tao Ran closed his umbrella haphazardly. "What's wrong with your hand?"

Annoyed, Luo Wenzhou scratched his wound, which was no longer bleeding. "A light bulb went out at my place. I was midway through changing it in the dark when the old man summoned me here on the double, and I accidentally stepped on His Majesty's tail—hey, Deputy Lu!"

Speak of the devil.

Lu Youliang waved at both of them and blew toward the meeting room like a gust of wind. Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran hurried after him.

***

"TODAY WAS THE LAST DAY of Yancheng Number Sixteen Junior High's student-recruitment summer camp. The school had hired a bus so that the students could visit the Xiling Paleo-Anthropological Museum. In addition to the driver and teacher, eighteen kids total went on the trip; they'll be entering the sixth grade come fall. They finished their museum tour at five and set off back to the school. They were supposed to arrive at seven, but they didn’t, and no one has been able to contact the bus or its passengers.”

No simple traffic accident would have resulted in an alert to the municipal bureau’s criminal investigation squad at this hour. Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran exchanged glances, but no one said anything. Deputy Lu pushed open the door to the meeting room; everyone inside made as if to stand up, but Lu Youliang gestured for them to continue. “Don’t mind me, keep going!”

The projector clicked, and a huge satellite map appeared on the screen.

“The lost bus’s license plate said NLXXXX. It came from Hengtong Rental Services. The driver, Han Jiang, is a forty-one-year-old male who’s been driving for fifteen years. The teacher, Hu Lingling, is a thirty-two-year-old female. She’s employed by Number Sixteen Junior High, and she’s a Yancheng local. The bus left the museum’s back gate at 5:05 p.m. and got onto the highway around six. A few parents learned that sections of the highway were temporarily closed due to the weather, so they called Hu Lingling to check in. The teacher told them that the driver had already made a detour, but the driving conditions still weren’t good, so they expected to reach the school one or two hours late. At around 7:40, parents waiting at the school called again, but Hu Lingling’s phone was off. At that point, since the parents weren’t aware of the problem yet, they tried calling their children. Only one call went through, and on it, they heard kids crying and screaming, plus a man’s angry shouts and curses. Four seconds later, the call dropped.

“The parents called the police. A few of the kids had phones with apps for GPS-tracking children installed, but all the signals were in separate locations scattered across the foot of a mountain, so the kids were probably forced to toss their phones out. There’s one kid whose running shoes have GPS tracking, though, and that signal shows that they left their planned route. They’re currently in the southern region of the Xiling County mountains and are continuing south.”

“Was the hijacker on the bus to begin with, or was it hijacked en route?” Luo Wenzhou asked. “Has the hijacker tried to make contact? Or made any demands to the parents?”

“We’re not sure whether there are demands yet. The hijacker hasn’t called.”

Deputy Lu looked up. “Luo Wenzhou, this case involves a number of districts and counties in our jurisdiction. All departments will need to cooperate seamlessly with the SWAT team. You’ll coordinate everything and report directly to me. Can you handle that?”

Luo Wenzhou froze for a moment, suddenly feeling gazes around the room land on him. It was a good thing he had nerves of steel. His face barely moving a muscle, he nodded lightly. “Yes.”

“The kids’ safety is our top priority. Move out immediately!”

***

THE RAIN GREW HEAVIER. It showed no sign of stopping. Next to the teacher sat a girl in a floral-print dress that was already wet from the rain coming in the window. She didn't dare try to close it, though.

"Dage, what do you want?" the girl heard Hu-laoshi beg. "You can take everything—all the money on the bus. We won't say a word. And I have contact info for a few parents. If you're facing some sort of trouble, I can contact them—"

"Shut up," the man sitting by the driver interrupted coldly, the machete in his hand glinting. "Enough bullshit! Do what I tell you. Keep driving!"

The young teacher looked up and made eye contact with the middle-aged driver in the rearview mirror. She looked at him imploringly, hoping that the man holding the steering wheel would think of something.

But the driver's gaze held only fear. Looking away, he followed the hijacker's orders.

Since they'd taken a detour, the bus full of students had been driving down a narrow, muddy road when they encountered a broken-down little car blocking the way. The car had stopped right in the middle of the road, which was too narrow for the bus to drive around the vehicle, so the driver and teacher got out to talk to the owner. He was a haggard-looking young man who, despite his appearance, seemed very amicable. The three of them had joined forces to push the car to the side. But once they'd finally cleared the road, Hu-laoshi felt a blade pressed into her back before she could straighten up again. That apparently amicable young man had been a criminal lying in wait.

The windshield wipers creaked as if they were about to give out. The bus was now well into Xiling's mountains; there was no one else around for miles.

A sudden flash of lightning illuminated the hijacker's pale face. "Drive to that empty area up ahead," he said, "and park."

The bus driver did so obediently. When the engine noise died, it only emphasized the quiet of their surroundings, which made the atmosphere even more frightening. The teacher's heart was in her throat. The girl next to her began to sob uncontrollably, and she hurried to cover the girl's mouth. She shook her head at the other children, gesturing for them to remain quiet so as not to anger the hijacker. As she did so, she took a few deep breaths, striving to keep her panic and terror in check. She reached carefully into her bag.

"You." The hijacker put the machete against the bus driver's neck, then pointed at Hu Lingling. Her hand froze in her bag. The criminal's icy gaze pinned her in place as he ordered, "Don't try anything back there. Come up to the front."

In that exact, pivotal moment, Hu Lingling found what she was looking for. She retracted her hand and surreptitiously stuffed the object she'd retrieved into the hand of the student in her arms, then smoothed the girl's hair soothingly. The girl's eyes widened. Hu Lingling didn't say anything, only glanced outside meaningfully. Then she stood slowly, put her hands in the air, and walked to the front, as the hijacker wanted.

The girl wearing the floral-print dress gripped the personal-safety alarm tightly in her hand and hid it behind her back.

***

LESS THAN TWO MILES AWAY, the filthy-rich wastrels headed indoors, drenched from head to toe. At first, they'd said they wanted to drive off-road vehicles. Halfway through, they decided that wasn't exciting enough and switched to dirt bikes. Now, after screaming their way around the mountain, they were all soaked.

Fei Du unbuttoned his collar, threw his helmet aside, and accepted a towel, then reached up to comb back his wet hair. He had to admit that death-defying entertainment was certainly cathartic.

“Fei-zong, you're not leaving today, are you?”

The beautiful woman who'd handed him the towel was looking at him, her chin in hand. Her La Panthère perfume melded with the humid air and wafted straight toward Fei Du, intense but cold. The girl's sophisticated aura contrasted with the adrenaline rush of racing in the rain, a temptation practically custom-made for Fei Du.

At his side, Zhang Donglai laughed like a hyena. Fei Du didn't even need to wonder; he knew exactly who'd planned this.

Fei Du looked at the girl. Staying the night wouldn't hurt, but for some reason, he just couldn't summon any interest. The scent of La Panthère seemed to lack something wild. It was as though he was desperately craving ghost peppers and had instead been served a steak covered in black-pepper sauce. He ached, longing for something stronger, heavier; even if he couldn't get it, he wouldn't settle for less.

Thus, although he smiled at the girl politely, he pretended not to catch her hint. “I am, in fact. I have some business to take care of tomorrow morning, so I’ll have to go to work early. I’ll head back to the city in a bit.”

The girl looked a bit disappointed. “You made the trip all the way out here, and it’s so dark now—the roads would be difficult to navigate. It’d be dangerous to go back at this point.”

“More dangerous than riding a dirt bike in a thunderstorm? You know, I originally wasn’t even going to come today, but I somehow had the feeling that if I didn’t, I’d regret it.” Fei Du’s sweet, flirty remarks seemed to come out effortlessly as he gazed at the girl. “Seeing you, I know that my intuition was right. I don’t regret coming. It would’ve been worth it even if it’d been raining knives.”

The girl flushed at his gaze and failed to come up with a response.

Fei Du picked up a bowl of ginger tea. He’d just decided to leave after he finished it when the club owner came by. “Lord Fei, if you want to head back, please at least wait a while,” the owner said. “I hear the roads have been closed. Some madman has apparently hijacked a bus full of schoolkids and hidden somewhere in the area. They’ve sent the SWAT team out.”

***

THE CRAZY HIJACKER stood guard over the bus’s only door with a machete in each hand. Unafraid, he pointed one blade each at the only two other adults. Then he threw an old dumbphone to Hu-laoshi. “I want you to call them now.”

Hu-laoshi glanced at the girl in the floral dress, then at the cowering driver. She slowly accepted the phone and the paper list of the students present, then dialed one of the parents. “Hello… Th-this is…the teacher in charge of the field trip, Hu Lingling. We were hijacked along the wa—ah!”

The hijacker poked the back of her neck with the tip of the machete. The sharp pain, and her cold sweat, played havoc with her nerves.

“Don’t say useless shit,” he ordered. “Just tell them I want cash. They can either pool their own funds or find a sucker with money. I want five million, brought to my chosen location before daylight. Once they have the money, I’ll tell them where to bring it. I don’t care if they want to contact the police. These kids are in my hands, and for every cop car I see, I’ll pick one of these brats off. And If I can’t run, I’ll bomb this bus. You’ll learn what ‘burnt to a crisp’ really means!”

***

THE CALL CUT OFF with a click. Luo Wenzhou looked up.

“We’ve got a rough location, Boss,” Lang Qiao reported. “It matches the signal from the kid’s GPS shoes. How are we getting there?”

Luo Wenzhou thought for a moment. “How’s the investigation into the teacher and driver going?”

Lang Qiao froze. “Why? Didn’t they say they ran into the hijacker on the way…?”

"How would a lone hijacker know that the bus was full of kids? And even if he did, where'd he get the confidence to take on two adults alone?"

Lang Qiao's expression turned horrified. At that moment, Tao Ran's call came in. "Sergeant Luo, we're looking into the driver, Han Jiang's, home. He sold most of his furniture recently. His neighbors say he might be in debt from a gambling addiction."

***

HU LINGLING'S HEART RACED in her chest. The hijacker before her was gesturing smugly, his machete weaving through the air.

Things can't continue like this, she thought, again meeting the eyes of the girl in the floral dress. The child seemed to understand her gaze. She curled up by the bus window, quietly cracked it open, triggered the alarm, and threw it outside.

When the sharp sound of a siren erupted next to the bus, the machete-wielding hijacker froze. Seizing the opportunity, Hu Lingling jumped up and threw herself at him. They rolled, grappling, out the half-open door of the bus. Ignoring the pain of the freezing blade slicing her body open, Hu Lingling yelled at the driver, "Get moving! *Drive!*"

Chapter 5

THE CHILDREN ABOARD THE BUS descended into chaos. “Han-laoshi, hurry up and drive!” some screamed, while others cried, “Hu-laoshi!”

Eyes bloodshot, the hijacker stabbed the machete into Hu Lingling’s stomach. Teaching was a steady job, and up until now, Hu Lingling had led a stable life and suffered no misfortunes or illnesses. She’d never known that pain like this could exist. Feeling her strength leave her limbs, she instinctively tried to curl up. Yet she also continued to stare at the bus, hoping that the door would close in time for the driver to safely escape with the children.

The keys dangled from the ignition, swaying slightly despite the still air. The hijacker had seemingly forgotten to take them. The driver, Han Jiang, had his hand on the gearshift. All he had to do was press a single button, and the door would close. Han Jiang had years of driving experience, and he was very skilled. He could hit the road instantly, escaping these empty mountains…

But none of that happened.

Han Jiang sat unmoving in the driver’s seat with a terrified expression on his face. “Stop!” he yelled at the hijacker.

Hu Lingling was in too much pain to speak, her eyes red with desperation. She shook her head at Han Jiang, trying to tell him to leave her. Then she heard the simple, honest bus driver continue, “Didn’t we agree we only wanted money? What are we going to do if there's fucking blood on our hands?"

Finally, Hu Lingling realized what had happened. A piercing chill crawled up her spine.

In the same moment, without anyone noticing, the curtain in the corner of the bus moved slightly. During all the chaos, the little girl in the floral dress had ducked behind the curtain, climbed up to the window, and now—resembling a tiny, thin-limbed kitten—crawled out the window and jumped to the ground.

Now that Han Jiang had thwarted the hijacker's murder attempt, the hijacker threw the machete to the driver, livid. Then he bent over and, pulling Hu Lingling up by her hair, began venting his frustrations by kicking and punching her. No one could look away from the brutality.

Meanwhile, the sound of the girl's footsteps was swallowed up by the howling wind and rain and the screams of the girl's teacher. The starless, moonless sky became the girl's friend as she skirted the bus's headlights and fled the scene.

The rough mountain roads lacked road signs, lights, and other living beings. Every towering rock and crooked tree looked like a hidden monster. The girl couldn't tell what direction she was running in, and she was too scared to look back. Even the sound of her own footsteps made her jumpy; it felt like that knife-wielding demon was right behind her.

No one had ever taught the girl what to do if a situation like this occurred out in the wilderness; she could only continue to run.

Suddenly, car headlights flashed in front of her. The girl couldn't have been more petrified; at this moment, humans were as scary as ghosts.

Panicked, she couldn’t decide where to go, and she accidentally tripped over a rock. She landed on her face and let out an alarmed noise.

Brakes squealed. The little girl’s ears rang, and her muscles seized up completely. She heard a very crisp, very young voice ask, “Is it a little animal, Daddy? Is it a lamb?”

That voice reawakened the girl’s worst fears. Her panicked heart slammed against her chest. When she heard footsteps, her eyes widened. A man approached her holding an umbrella. He looked elegant and refined, not like a bad guy at all.

“Uncle,” she cried, “please save me!”

Mud stained her floral-print dress, and she had scraped one knee. She’d also torn her little toenail when she stubbed her toe, and it was bleeding. The man studied her and then, very gently, picked her up. The girl’s former cautiousness had shattered in the presence of another child, and her terror was so extreme that she irrationally placed her complete trust in this stranger who had appeared out of nowhere.

“A bad man hijacked our bus,” she told him. “He had a knife, and he stabbed our teacher. Just back there, Uncle…”

The man’s footsteps were as light as a feather, as though he was afraid of startling someone. He raised one finger of the hand holding the umbrella to his lips. “Shh…” he responded. “Don’t be afraid. Be good. Let my daughter keep you company.”

The girl from the bus followed his gaze and spotted the face of another girl behind the half-rolled-down car window. This other girl was about twelve or thirteen and had her hair in pigtails. Her cheeks were full, and she had sly yet beautiful eyes. Her lips were cherry red and shiny, as though she'd stolen lip gloss from an adult.

Her smile was as radiant as a flower.

***

NOT FAR AWAY, in the brightly lit off-roading club, a bunch of wealthy young hedonists were staring at their phones, looking for updates. Hands behind his back, Fei Du raked his gaze over the wall displaying a map of Xiling. The wall also showed live racing updates and displayed celebrities' autographs and photos.

He turned back to the owner of the daredevils' club. "I'm not familiar with this area. Are there any other villages or attractions nearby?" he asked.

"Xiling was designed as a recreation area for Yancheng. It specializes in high-end experiences," the boss replied. "Besides us, there's a winery with a golf course and an equestrian club. There used to be a few historical villages, but their residents were all moved to the city. With this weather, I doubt anyone's at the winery or equestrian club today."

"Oh." Fei Du nodded, and his gaze landed on a group photo of the club's employees. "I notice that a lot of people didn't come to work today," he said suddenly. "Even the band was hired. Where's the house musician?"

The owner offered a vague response about there not being many customers. *I wouldn't have come in this weather either, except that I had to babysit you careless rich boys,* he thought.

"If the police call, let me talk to them," Fei Du said.

That baffled the owner. “If the police call? Why would the police—”

He was interrupted by the phone ringing over at the reception desk. The pianist happened to be standing there, so she reached out a hand and put the phone to her ear lazily. “Hello? Xiling Off-Road Club… Huh? What? Oh, hold on—Boss, it’s the police!”

***

THE POLICE WORKED FAST. They were approaching the hijackers’ location.

Judging by the satellite images, the hijackers had chosen a spot in a strategic position. The place was empty on all sides, meaning that the SWAT team would be spotted immediately if it tried to approach. Meanwhile, the hijackers had a bunch of kids in a bus, and the bus had curtains; if they kept the curtains shut, there’d be nothing the police snipers could do. Seconds ticked by. The police tried to call the number back, but the caller’s phone was turned off. The hijackers were running a tight ship. The cops would have to think of a way to enable the hijackers to contact them instead.

After ten o’clock, the rain finally lessened. Although it was the middle of the night, Tao Ran quickly took a small team straight to the bus driver’s home, and they turned the residence upside down.

“Han Jiang used to drive trucks. Then he started playing cards,” Tao Ran reported. “He was losing hundreds of thousands a year, and he’d even missed work over it. He was fired, and his wife divorced him and took their kid with her. After that, he behaved for a while, and a friend helped him find a job at a rental company, but that only lasted a few years before he got hooked on mahjong. He was targeted by a rigged-gambling ring and lost everything. On top of that, he owes over a million to loan sharks."

"No wonder he risked it all." Lang Qiao pressed on her earpiece. "What about the other guy? Any clues about him? His gambling aside, Han Jiang has never even been booked at the station. Even if he decided to try a life of crime, I doubt he'd start with something this crazy. Whoever planned this must have experience."

"Han Jiang has a distant relative called Han Chengzheng," said Tao Ran. "A twenty-nine-year-old male. He's gone to prison twice, once for armed robbery and once for assault. He's recently been let out, and he came to Yancheng to look for a job—or at least that's what he said. He never actually did anything, and he mooched off Han Jiang a lot. Apparently, he's had several conflicts with people and often carries a machete around. The neighbors all avoid him. Last night, Han Chengzheng rented a shitty little car, and then he left this morning. We don't know where he went, but he's probably the hijacker. I've sent you guys a photo."

"Like really does attract like, huh?" Luo Wenzhou said from the side. "Han Jiang used to be married? And he has a kid? How old? Boy or girl?"

"A boy, nine years old. The ex-wife moved out of town with him, and she won't let Han Jiang have any contact with him because of his gambling addiction. The rental company Han Jiang works for has a long-term working relationship with Number Sixteen Junior High, and every time the school has a field trip, they send him. The teachers all treat him like staff. He's usually honest and gentle, and he quite likes kids. No one expected this from him."

“Got it. Negotiation team, did you catch that?” Luo Wenzhou’s brain rapidly organized all the information. “We can deduce from the teacher’s reaction when the hijacker called that she didn’t know that he was working with Han Jiang. She trusted Han Jiang, which means that unless something extreme happens, Han Jiang will try not to reveal his part in the plan. I’m guessing he felt the loan sharks had left him no other choice, so he probably has some sympathy for the children. The other hijacker is likely the driving force behind the kidnapping and ransom. He’s an unrepentant repeat offender. He might do anything. They have the same goal right now, but their partnership probably isn’t very strong. We can—”

“Boss,” Lang Qiao cut in suddenly, “the phone! The hijacker is calling!”

Luo Wenzhou looked up. “All departments, pay attention!”

With that, everyone was at the ready. They put in their earpieces, and the negotiation team prepared themselves.

The second call was coming exactly one hour after the first one. A negotiator picked it up. This time, the caller wasn’t the female teacher from earlier; the voice was male and hostile. “Is the money ready?”

Everyone’s hearts sank.

“Who are you?” the negotiator asked tentatively. “Where’s the teacher we spoke to before?”

The only response was the man’s heavy breathing.

Afraid to anger the hijacker, the negotiator added, “A few of us parents have rounded up three million in cash. My wife is rushing over here with the money as we speak. We’ll get the rest as soon as possible. We’ll borrow, if necessary. But you can’t go back on your word and hurt anyone!”

The man on the other end started laughing. “Whoa. How obedient. You guys went and got the money? You didn’t go to the police?”

The negotiator looked up, silently requesting instructions. At his side, Lang Qiao scribbled Luo Wenzhou’s instructions on a tablet. *Repeat offender. Tell the truth.*

“We…we did,” the negotiator said in a panicked voice. “Before you contacted us, we had already… You…you didn’t tell us not to soon enough—”

“Oh?” the hijacker interrupted. “Then where are they?”

“The Xiling County Public Security Bureau said they had to consult the municipal bureau, and the municipal bureau said they needed at least another hour to get here.” The negotiator’s acting skills were incredible. He sounded as though he was so worried that he was on the verge of tears. “We really can’t wait any longer, so we started gathering the money just in case. Please…you can’t harm the kids.”

“I told you guys not to rely on those useless pigs.” The hijacker sounded very smug, and he’d seemingly relaxed slightly—perhaps because he’d been told that the money was almost at hand. “All right. I’ll let you talk to your kid,” he continued. “What’s his name?”

Someone handed the negotiator a piece of paper, and he took a quick glance. “Chen Hao. I’m Chen Hao’s father. Please put him on.”

The hijacker let out a cold laugh. Not long after, a boy’s voice came over the line. “Daddy! Daddy!”

A few officers from the negotiating team gestured at each other. The child sounded terrified but still lively. It seemed clear that everyone was unharmed.

“Don’t be afraid, Haohao. Are you with the other children?” the negotiator asked, trying to confirm the others’ safety. “You have to be brave and set an example for the other kids, okay?”

The boy probably realized that the man on the phone wasn’t his father; he responded with a vague noise. Before he could say anything else, the hijacker took the phone back. “Enough bullshit. You heard your son’s voice. Don’t try anything funny. And we don’t need food or water, so don’t think you can sneak any cops over here that way. Hurry up and get the money. If I get the money, you get your kid.”

The negotiator furrowed his brow and shook his head at his colleagues. At that point, Lang Qiao withdrew the paper on which they’d set down their “try to find a way to send someone in” plan, gesturing for the negotiator to switch to plan B. “Hold on,” the negotiator said. “C-can I speak to an adult from the school? My son is too afraid. Any adult will do!”

Hearing “any adult will do,” the hijacker gave a strange scoff and, unexpectedly, agreed. A deep but slightly fearful male voice came over the phone. “Hello?”

It was Han Jiang!

“Laoshi, I…I’m Chen Hao’s father,” the negotiator said in a hushed voice, trying to sound like he was desperately begging. “Laoshi, this is very selfish of me, but do…do you have children? Can you sympathize with me?”

Han Jiang was silent for a while. “…I do.”

“Then please keep the kids safe no matter what, Laoshi! We’ll figure out the money. As a parent, you must understand how we feel. I know you’re in a difficult position too. You must be very scared yourself… Your kid must be about Haohao’s age, right? Please think of your own child. We can’t be there, so all we can do is beg you to look after them. If they’re just frightened, it’s fine—just, please, don’t let anything happen to them. We’re all begging you!”

Han Jiang was silent for even longer this time. When he spoke again, his tone was much less steady. “I…I’ll do my best—”

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HAN JIANG WAS INTERRUPTED by a huge roar from halfway up the mountain. Next, heavy metal music exploded in the quiet night, the sound blasting recklessly through the air. Blinding light pierced the darkness, followed by wild whistles and screams.

The hijacker immediately exploded. He picked up his machete as he grabbed the phone. “Who’s that? The police? You lied to me! Do you want these kids dead?!”

The negotiator’s panicked excuse came through the phone. “We d-didn’t—”

A woman’s sickly sweet voice rang out over a megaphone. “Babes, don’t be afraid. Get in your cars! There’s just one road down this mountain. We already survived the Track of Death—you think the boys will let anything happen to you?”

Someone whistled through the megaphone, the noise threatening to shatter everything within a ten-mile radius. Rainbow lasers raced over the mountain. The light hit several ostentatious modified sports cars, projecting huge shadows onto a mountain slope not far from the bus. They looked as though they were on the verge of flight.

Han Jiang grabbed the hijacker's hand—the one that held the machete. "There's an off-roading club nearby," he said in a low voice. "We looked into it, remember? Calm down!"

"Fuck off!" the hijacker growled, enraged. "What kind of coincidence is this? Why would they happen to be here right now?!"

"We really don't know," the negotiator said loudly on the other end of the phone. "You guys can relocate, though. The money will be ready soon. Don't hurt the kids. Laoshi! Laoshi! Laoshi!"

The repetition of "laoshi" was like a sharp needle stabbing Han Jiang's nerves. Sometimes schoolchildren had trouble differentiating between school staff and outside contractors, so they called all the adults at school "laoshi." That was what they usually called Han Jiang. The word summoned what little conscience he had left, and he grabbed his accomplice with both hands.

"Did you hear that?" he demanded. "The money's almost ready! This is the last step, so do you have to cause problems now? Take a good look—do those look like police cars to you? They're racing through the mountain paths. They're not planning on coming over here. Scared shitless by a few shadows—what are you even good for?!"

The hijacker followed Han Jiang's gaze and seemed convinced. His grip on the machete loosened slightly.

"Also, a brat escaped earlier, so we're not safe here," Han Jiang added. "I'll drive. Let's go somewhere else."

The racing playboys were having a ball making their presence felt. The deafening sounds of the race-car engines encircled the mountain, seemingly never-ending. Somehow, though they were far away and didn’t seem to be approaching, it felt like they were surrounding the bus. The steady beat of dance music slammed against the two criminals’ chests, giving them no choice but to leave the area and head for the only spot far enough from the noise.

Luo Wenzhou’s voice filtered into Lang Qiao’s earpiece. “The bus has been forced into the snipers’ range. Find a way to get it to stop.”

Aboard the bus, the phone rang; the hijacker hadn’t had time to turn it back off yet. The parent from earlier rambled, “We have more money. In cash. But it’s just a little over three million. We’re still working on the rest…”

The music was getting farther away, yet the drums seemed to grow ever faster, striking their hearts over and over until they were nervous wrecks. The machete-wielding hijacker was incensed, his hatred of the rich mounting. “No!” he roared. “Five million, and not one yuan less!”

Han Jiang stepped on the brakes. “Enough is enough. Let’s split it fifty-fifty. A million and a half each isn’t bad. Don’t wait until the police come!”

A million would be enough to pay off the loan sharks. Once he was rid of them, he could reclaim his dignity. He’d never have to live in fear again.

But his accomplice refused. “I want five million!”

“We really tried our best, Laoshi,” the negotiator on the phone said hastily. “Please think of your kid. They’re just children, Laoshi, please!”

A vein jumped on Han Jiang’s temple, but his partner warned, “If you haven’t got five million, I’ll kill all these little brats. I’ve been to prison. I’m not afraid to go again.”

Han Jiang grabbed the machete his partner had tossed him earlier. “I don’t fucking want to go to jail!”

The two men snorted like fighting bulls. After a while, the hijacker stared stonily at Han Jiang. “Uncle, have you got cold feet?”

Han Jiang didn’t respond, and his expression remained stiff, but he used his peripheral vision to glance at the bus full of terrified kids—he *was* regretting this.

Beside him, however, the hijacker suddenly started to laugh eerily. He handed Han Jiang the phone. “All right, fine. Three million. Let’s quit while we’re ahead.”

Han Jiang hesitated for a moment, then accepted the phone. “Okay—get one person to bring the money. Just one. Better if it’s a woman. Bring it to—”

Before he finished speaking, a cold light flashed before his eyes. Children’s shrill screams erupted all around him. Han Jiang twisted automatically, but he couldn’t avoid the sharp blade that was now lodged in his belly.

Han Jiang howled, fighting back on pure instinct despite the pain. He threw himself at the other man, who took a step back and stumbled into the bus door behind him. The hijacker twisted the machete forcefully, and for an instant, his back was exposed to the glass bus door, which had no curtains. Han Jiang held him firmly in place.

A bullet shot through the window and struck the hijacker in the back of the head—a clean headshot!

Police and ambulance sirens pierced the night air.

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HALF AN HOUR LATER, after he'd cleaned up the scene, Luo Wenzhou arrived at the mountain with the deafening music. From a distance, he spotted Fei Du leaning against a car. The young man's shirt was unbuttoned, exposing his chest all the way down to his navel. The stark white of his skin contrasted with his tattoo, and the strands of hair at the nape of his neck were still dripping wet.

There was no need for props or a background; just the sight of Fei Du standing there alone emanated a sinful, debauched feeling.

Luo Wenzhou had come for a noble reason, but when his gaze slipped down over all that exposed skin, he suddenly felt awkward for some reason. Coughing dryly, he said, "Thanks, guys, for today."

Fei Du accepted a flute of champagne from the girl next to him and raised it toward Luo Wenzhou in a toast from afar. "No need to thank me. I didn't even need to do any acting."

Luo Wenzhou didn't respond to that.

For whatever reason, Fei Du was getting on his nerves again.

Then Lang Qiao's call came in, interrupting the weird mood. "Sergeant Luo," she gasped, "a kid's missing from the bus!"

Chapter 6

"THE MISSING GIRL, Qu Tong, is eleven. She was originally on the bus, and she tried to distract the criminals from her teacher by throwing a personal-safety alarm out the vehicle window. Then she escaped out the window during the chaos. We don't know where she is now."

"Get a few police dogs over here from Xiling," Luo Wenzhou responded. He was rather calm after having heard Lang Qiao's report. "It's okay. A kid can't have gotten far. Get a few of our colleagues who are good at talking to comfort the parents. To be honest, if she hadn't run, then the consequences would've been unimaginable once the hijackers realized that she was the one who threw the alarm. I think she was pretty smart."

Fei Du looked back and whistled at his hooligan friends. He could rally these loafers with a single call.

The playboys had been racing around in the rain and hadn't fully dried off when they were roped into the hostage-saving operation. They only served as props, and they hadn't caught a glimpse of the hijackers; still, this was enough excitement to last them through the year. They surrounded Fei Du at his first whistle. "Need something else, Lord Fei?"

"Municipal bureau." Fei Du pointed his chin at Luo Wenzhou, encapsulating the handsome man's entire career with those two words. "An eleven-year-old girl went missing from the bus. I'll share her photo soon. If you guys are free tonight, keep an eye out."

"No problem!" For once, Zhang Donglai could stand up tall in front of Fei Du. He approached them, all smiles. "Hello, Sergeant Luo. You've worked hard. If you need anything, just holler! We're all family here!"

Luo Wenzhou surveyed him impassively. Apparently, after this young master got into trouble before, his family grounded him for over two months; he had probably only recently served his sentence and regained his freedom. Right now, all he was wearing was a pair of holey pants and a vest. He now had his hair in a mohawk resembling a rooster's comb—a row of long, colorful hair stood atop his head, sticking out this way and that. There was also a word shaved into the back of his head.

"What's that on your head?" Luo Wenzhou asked.

Standing up straight, Zhang Donglai replied, "It says 'Endure.'"

Zhang Donglai's appearance was the result of him "enduring"? Luo Wenzhou couldn't help but feel some admiration.

"Don't worry, Sergeant Luo. I'm familiar with the area," said Zhang Donglai. "It's lousy with the rich. But aside from their luxury and corruption, there're no other beasts here for her to run into. For thirty miles around, the most dangerous wild animals are squirrels. She'll be safe for sure!"

Zhang Donglai's claims were true enough—Xiling had always been a beautiful, yet remote and unapproachable, region. Even fewer people than usual were around now, due to the rainstorm. How far could a panicked little girl run?

No one was too worried when they first heard the news about the girl, and their work continued as usual. Han Chengzheng, the insane hijacker, was dragged away in a body bag. The ambulance left with Hu-laoshi, who was badly injured, as well as Han Jiang, who was clinging to life. The frightened children left in batches with their parents to undergo a physical exam and therapy. The Xiling canine unit arrived soon after, and a few rescue teams split up to cover more ground by working separately. Zhang Donglai managed to find a bunch of colorful convertibles, which played the theme song of the children’s show *Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf* as they drove along nearby roads, looking for the girl.

The professionals and volunteers each did their own thing, not getting in each other’s way. They were actually working well together, aside from the fact that the echoing theme song was getting annoying.

Fei Du leaned against the door of his car. “Want to go look at the spot where the girl left the bus?”

Luo Wenzhou unabashedly accepted the free ride. In the car, he poked Fei Du’s shirt collar. “Put your shirt on properly,” he said in a rather old-fashioned tone. “What were you guys doing out here in the middle of the night?”

Fei Du pulled the garment shut lazily, not even checking to see whether the few buttons he did up went through the right buttonholes. The wet fabric hid nothing. In fact, this seemed even more indecent than leaving it open. “Racing.”

“With the car roof open?”

“We were on dirt bikes. Two even flipped over. Actually, before you guys closed the roads, an ambulance took away a guy who’d broken a bone.” Driving the car away carefully, Fei Du for once teased Luo Wenzhou without using his usual rude tone. “Of course, that might be a little too exciting for a middle-aged man like you.”

Luo Wenzhou looked down at his mud-covered boots, mournfully realizing that he might in fact be approaching middle age—

because he really couldn’t understand how empty these young men must feel for them to do something like that.

“What happened to your hand?” Fei Du asked, glimpsing Luo Wenzhou’s three scratch marks. “Who’s got such a bad temper?”

Luo Wenzhou paused for a moment, focusing on the various team reports coming in on his earpiece, then answered, “Your little brother.”

Fei Du looked bewildered.

“Got it,” Luo Wenzhou said into the walkie-talkie. “Pay extra attention to ravines and gaps. After what she’s been through, the kid could be in fight-or-flight mode. She might’ve hidden somewhere.”

He put down the walkie-talkie and turned to Fei Du. “Do these look like scratches from a primate? Where’s your common sense? That cat Tao Ran got you all those years ago—did you forget about him? You two rugrats both get into something new every other day, and then someone has to clean up after you.”

Fei Du froze as the nighttime scenery whizzed past the car windows on either side. For a while, he didn’t say anything. Not until bright lights started appearing before them, a signal that they were nearing the spot the girl had run off from, did he ask in an unreadable tone, “It’s been so many years. You’re still taking care of the cat?”

“What’s the alternative? Give him to you? If you want him, hurry up and take him. And don’t try to give him back to me.” Whenever Luo Wenzhou thought of Luo Yiguo, his hand hurt. He scratched his wound absently. “Park a little farther away. If the kid left footprints, we don’t want to obscure them.”

Fei Du did just as he asked. “Do you…” He cleared his throat. “Do you need to go get a shot?”

Luo Wenzhou was stunned to hear Fei Du voice such a normal concern. He found himself slightly tongue-tied, in fact; this was even more shocking than Luo Yiguo coming to snuggle with him. “N-no…I’m good. The last one I got should still be effective.”

He got the rabies vaccine even more frequently than a dog would. He was invincible for eleven and a half months of the year. The doctor who gave him the shots joked that he should get a membership card and start buying the shots in bulk rather than paying for them one by one.

After his initial shock passed, Luo Wenzhou couldn’t help making a jab back at Fei Du. “How come you’re so filial all of a sudden? It’s making me a little flustered.”

Fei Du’s expression returned to normal, and he also reverted to his usual annoying tone. “Don’t be,” he said with a hint of a smile. “Caring for the elderly is everyone’s responsibility. Tch. Long nights with only a cat for company… Just thinking of that makes me cold and lonely.”

It might’ve been Fei Du’s messy attire, or Luo Wenzhou’s own hyperactive self-consciousness, but even as Fei Du ran his mouth, the sergeant picked up on a hint of seduction in his eyes. That, along with the way Fei Du had all but moaned “long nights,” fired Luo Wenzhou’s imagination, and he couldn’t help accidentally crossing the line.

“‘Caring’ how?” he shot back at Fei Du. “Actions speak louder than words, you know.”

As soon as Luo Wenzhou’s off-color joke landed, both men fell silent, and a mood that would have been difficult to describe settled inside the tiny race car.

Luo Wenzhou knew he'd put his foot in his mouth, and he wished he could retract his words. After a while, he coughed dryly then tried to fix the situation with a not-so-brilliant line: "Don't forget to pick up some snacks and come visit your old man on holidays."

Fei Du forced a smile. "Should I bring incense[7] as well?"

"Fuck off!"

They exchanged a glance, then got out of the car at the same time, deciding to leave the awkwardness behind in the vehicle.

Suddenly remembering something, Luo Wenzhou turned back to Fei Du. "Oh, right—didn't you really like that cat initially? Why didn't you want to keep it in the end?"

Fei Du paused. Faraway headlights suddenly swept over his forehead and brows. Their curves looked hand-carved, as though Fei Du's silhouette had been carefully designed.

"No, I didn't, actually. I don't like pets—they're too much work. But I would've felt bad saying that to Tao Ran's face. Anyway…" Fei Du looked up, one brow twitching slightly. "Maybe I torture animals to death as a hobby. Maybe I was afraid I couldn't control myself. That would've been hard to explain to Tao Ran, so I distanced myself instead. Do you think that'd be a reasonable excuse, Sergeant Luo?"

Luo Wenzhou froze for a moment. This didn't feel like another one of Fei Du's disgusting jokes. Before he could really analyze Fei Du's words, though, the voice of one of the search-team officers came through his earpiece. "Sergeant Luo, we found the alarm the girl threw out the window and some footprints."

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WHEN HU-LAOSHI WAS STABBED, the rain had already eased off a bit, so the bus's tire tracks hadn't washed away completely. The driver had been at the front of the bus when Hu-laoshi shoved the hijacker out the door. Qu Tong would've had to escape from the back of the bus, then run in a direction that wouldn't get her caught in the headlights. With that in mind, it didn't take long for the search team to find a few of her tiny footprints.

The police dogs were released, following the trail.

Everyone felt that they'd gotten quite lucky. The road the hijackers had picked was old and unmaintained. There was lots of mud, so Qu Tong had left behind plenty of footprints. If they followed those, they thought, surely they'd find the girl. But even when the clock ticked past midnight, there still was no sign of her.

Qu Tong's parents watched anxiously as the police and volunteer drivers scurried around. The mother's eyes were like motion-activated lights—they lit up whenever someone passed her. Then the light would go out again as each rescuer left.

"Sergeant Luo, come look at this."

Luo Wenzhou weaved through the group of people. A few police dogs had stopped at the same spot. They sat to the side, their tongues lolling. He patted one on the head as he passed it, then bent down to see blood on a sharp stone. Something had also gotten caught on the stone: a section of a leather sandal strap.

"We showed it to the parents, and they confirmed that this is a decorative strap from Qu Tong's sandal," one rescuer said. "There are shoeprints behind it, and then several long skid marks right here. We think the girl ran here, tripped on this stone, and fell. There are also shoeprints from an adult, as well as tire marks. The shoe was about a men's size seven or eight—most likely a man's."

Luo Wenzhou thought for a moment. "So you're saying someone just so happened to drive by here, then took the kid away."

"It's likely. The dogs lose her scent here."

Using his coworker's flashlight, Luo Wenzhou surveyed the whole area. There was a chaotic-looking line of footprints, and then clues that the girl had tripped. On the other hand, the man's footsteps were steady, each one clear and even. It didn't seem like he'd been in a rush.

"I think this is good news, Sergeant Luo. I mean, it just rained, and this is a mountainous area with loose soil, so safety's a concern. If a passerby did a good deed and saved her, she at least won't have to spend the night out in the wild."

But Luo Wenzhou's expression remained grave. He was silent for a long time. "Keep the scene intact," he said slowly. "Go get someone from Forensics to come take a look. I want them to tell me as soon as possible, based on the evidence here, whether the girl went with this guy willingly. Also…get ready to send out a missing-person report. And pay close attention to whether any children are found nearby."

"Yes, sir!"

"Go contact that museum that the kids visited today too." Luo Wenzhou lit a cigarette, his thoughts heavy. He reviewed everything carefully in his mind, trying to see whether he'd missed anything. "While you're at it, check out the museum guests and the security cameras at the highway entrances."

His coworker looked confused. "Huh?"

"Find out what cars passed by tonight," Luo Wenzhou said quietly. "Take special notice of any single male drivers. I was feeling pretty optimistic a minute ago, but now I suddenly feel like this situation doesn't warrant optimism at all."

Imagine if—in the remote wilderness, with no one else around—a disheveled little girl suddenly ran out in front of you and told you that a criminal had hijacked her school bus. How would a normal person react? The average citizen wouldn't have the guts to take on a knife-wielding criminal. They might not even dare to let the child into their car without verifying what she'd said. After all, plenty of criminals used children to help them commit crimes. A typical passerby might callously pretend not to see, or else question the girl, figure out the situation, and immediately call the police.

But from the moment they confirmed that the bus had been hijacked in Xiling County, every call the police received from that area was directed to Luo Wenzhou as quickly as possible. It had been hours since Qu Tong escaped, so why hadn't they heard anything?

Her disappearance cast a shadow over the entire rescue operation.

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THREE DAYS PASSED LIKE THAT. Missing-person notices went up all over the internet and in print media, as well as airing on the radio. But the police received no new information, and there were no leads about whoever had picked up Qu Tong.

Then, on the third evening, Qu Tong's parents visited Yancheng Municipal Public Security Bureau with a memory card.

"We don't know who left this or when. It was in the milk-delivery box, and with Qu Tong missing, we hadn't gotten around to picking up the milk for these last few days," said Qu Tong's father, his eyes reddened. "So bottles had been collecting there. We didn't remember the milk until the delivery person knocked on the door this morning to ask about it. When we collected the milk…this fell out of the box."

Lang Qiao took the memory card with a gloved hand. "What's on it?"

Qu Tong's mother suddenly broke down, bursting into tears. "A…recording."

Fifteen minutes later, Luo Wenzhou rushed into Deputy Lu's office. When Lu Youliang listened to the recording, he forgot to light the cigarette in his hand.

The whole thing was less than a minute long. It began with a girl's terrified screams. Next came the sounds of a frantic struggle. Thirty or so seconds later, the ruckus and screaming died down to nothing, and then there was a rattling like someone furiously shaking a metal box of bells. The reverberating ringing was heartrending; it seemed never-ending. Then, abruptly, the recording ended.

Once Lu Youliang had listened to the recording, the corner of his eye twitched, his expression changing.

“Deputy Lu,” said Luo Wenzhou, “I shouldn’t make random guesses. We don’t have enough evidence yet. Still, I listened to Lao-Yang talk about the Lianhuashan case for most of my life. ‘Memorable’ would be putting it lightly. But I have to confirm this with you. After all, we only heard about that case years ago—you’re the only one who experienced it firsthand. Is this recording similar to the calls the victims’ families used to get? Could this be a copycat?”

Lu Youliang slowly blew a smoke ring and didn’t say anything for a long time. Luo Wenzhou had never seen the old deputy look so serious.

“That was a huge case back in the day. You can still find the long reports the newspapers back then did. We didn’t know to keep things under wraps at the time, so details like ‘the victim’s parents received frightening phone calls’ got revealed to the public. But…” Lu Youliang paused. “The first case we knew of—the Lianhuashan case—included one detail I actually would’ve forgotten if you hadn’t brought it up. When the victim’s father was giving us his witness statement, he said that he’d heard the sound of his daughter’s pencil case on the phone. Guo Fei had the kind of metal pencil case that was popular at the time. According to her parents, she’d collected a handful of colorful little bells that she kept in the pencil case. She occasionally took it out and shook it, irritating her parents. They’d even yelled at her for that. Guo Fei’s father said that the sound on the phone was definitely someone shaking the pencil case. That was why he was certain that the girl on the phone was his daughter.”

Lu Youliang and Luo Wenzhou exchanged grim glances. This was a tiny detail, and they didn’t have a recording of the phone call, only the parents' testimony. They would have been anxious and frightened when they took the call, and given that unstable mental state, it was very possible they'd misheard. Since this detail was difficult to confirm, the police couldn't assume that it constituted concrete proof.

Neither the file on the case, nor Yang Zhengfeng's notes, mentioned this neglected detail. Even Deputy Lu had almost forgotten, and Luo Wenzhou had never heard of such a thing. The police wouldn't have publicized an unconfirmed detail like that, either. So…

Had the sound on the new recording been a coincidence? Or was someone replicating the case twenty years ago?

Was this a copycat or a ghost?

Chapter 7

"IF WE FOLLOW THIS LINE OF THINKING," Lang Qiao said somberly, her dark circles nearly as big as her eyes, "then either Wu Guangchuan crawled out of the morgue, or we caught the wrong person twenty years ago, and the real culprit is resuming their crimes."

"Someone successfully kidnaps six girls, and the police find neither hide nor hair of them. Then they do just as the kidnapper wants and find themselves a scapegoat. Even a normal person would become abnormally smug at that point—never mind someone who was abnormal to begin with. Would they really have stayed quiet all these years?" Luo Wenzhou shook his head. "If we did catch the wrong person, the actual kidnapper would've killed thousands over the last two decades."

Lang Qiao turned to him. "Your words are scaring me, Sergeant Luo."

"Right back at you." Luo Wenzhou twirled the pen in his hand. "Either way, I've asked to have someone keep an eye on Qu Tong's place. We'll start by looking into who left the memory card."

"I mean, we might not be able to find anything," Lang Qiao pointed out. "I just asked, and Qu Tong lives in an old neighborhood where the residents are often late with their property-management fees. There isn't even a security guard, so their building is basically wide open to strangers round the clock. Just last month, a neighbor was robbed. If we couldn't even find a robber, how will we find someone who just dropped something off?"

“Could we use other clues?” asked Tao Ran.

“It’s a common memory card—a domestically produced knockoff. There are hundreds of pages of the exact same product online. It was clean too—not a single fingerprint. As for the recording itself, the digital forensics team is doing their best to analyze it, but the culprit knew how to cover their tracks.” Luo Wenzhou shook his head. “It’s not looking good.”

They weren’t likely to find any leads. It was equally unlikely that the girl was still alive. The optimal period for a rescue—the first seventy-two hours—had already passed. In light of that, the recording the girl’s parents had received seemed most like a smug victory lap, a way to say, *I’m still here, I’m still the winner, and you guys can’t catch me*.

“There’s actually another possibility,” Tao Ran said after some thought. “Who could’ve passed the girl that night? We checked the security cameras at the nearby scenic areas and parks, plus at all major roads and highways. If the person who took the girl was just passing by coincidentally, there’d have been some sign of him, but we still haven’t found any such leads. Is it possible that he wasn’t just passing by? That he was actually following Qu Tong—or another kid about the same age on the bus—and just happened to encounter this hijacking? I don’t know why else he’d have been so careful to avoid all cameras.”

Lang Qiao caught on immediately. “Following someone doesn’t yield results right away. It had to have been going on for a while!”

On the last day of the summer camp, the students went on a field trip to the outskirts of the city, but before that, they’d only had activities near the school. If the mysterious kidnapper was following a student, he’d have had a much harder time hiding within the city. He could have been caught on a traffic camera or noticed by a neighbor at any time.

Lang Qiao jumped to her feet. “I’ll arrange a search right away!”

But Luo Wenzhou waved her off. “I already did. Sit down. After we investigated the crime scene that night, and didn’t find anyone suspicious, I asked them to trace the movements of the girls in the class. Eleven of the eighteen are girls, and they’re all around Qu Tong’s age. Six have features and builds that are pretty similar to hers. Even if we only focus on those six, though, they’d have collectively come in contact with thousands of people. And all we know from the crime scene is that the suspect’s shoe size is a seven or eight. That’s not enough information. The suspect is most likely male, but we can’t rule out the possibility that it’s a woman. In terms of appearance, we don’t even know the suspect’s silhouette, so it’s not realistic to go look at people one by one.”

Listening to this from the side, Lu Youliang heaved a sigh. He knew that, even if he’d been the one making all the decisions on this case, he couldn’t have done better than Luo Wenzhou. Yet Qu Tong still went missing. This unfortunate turn of events seemed almost fated.

“Back in the day, the kidnapper called victims’ families directly. But now that they know we can look up calls, they’ve switched to untraceable ways of delivering a message. They’re sure keeping up with the times.” Lang Qiao sighed too. “Is this like…‘God works hard, but the devil works harder’?”

Luo Wenzhou thought about it. “The victims were never found back then, dead or alive,” he said suddenly. “So how did we ultimately determine that Wu Guangchuan was the culprit? Because he had bloody clothes in his possession?”

“No. We didn’t handle the case strictly by the book. But we didn’t act lawlessly either,” said Deputy Lu. “What confirmed that Wu Guangchuan was the culprit, beyond the clothes, was the seventh girl. There were signs that she’d been sexually assaulted, and after she woke up, she identified the culprit. What was her name? Su something, I think… Su…”

“Su Xiaolan,” Tao Ran supplied. “My shifu mentioned her name in his notebook. She was Wu Guangchuan’s student.”

“Yes. That’s it.” Deputy Lu thought for a long time, but the details beyond that were still hazy. He sighed. “It’s been too long, and my brain isn’t as good as it used to be. I can’t remember much anymore. Might as well get the file.”

Luo Wenzhou kicked the oblivious Lang Qiao, who promptly ran off to complete the necessary paperwork.

Since the request came from Deputy Lu himself, the old file was pulled up quickly. They brushed twenty years’ worth of dust off the notes, which turned out to be much more detailed and objective than Yang-lao’s. Finally, the case was seeing the light of day again.

“Yes. This girl.” Deputy Lu pulled out a photo. Yang-lao’s journal hadn’t contained a photo of Su Xiaolan; she was still alive and probably hadn’t wanted to be bothered. This was Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran’s first time seeing the seventh victim.

She was an undeniably pretty girl. The long, elegant corners of her almond eyes angled upward toward her temples. When the photo was taken, she had a little makeup on, and her white teeth stood out against her red lips. Her cheek in her hand, she looked into the camera. Something about her was strangely precocious.

“Su Xiaolan attended Brocade Junior High. During this case, she was in the eighth grade.”

Lang Qiao frowned, confused. “They said her home environment wasn’t great, right? For days, her parents didn’t even realize that she was missing. How did she manage to go to a private school?”

“She was a dance student. The teachers in charge of her elementary school dance troupe liked her a lot and recommended her to Brocade. Back then, if you specialized in dance, they would waive your tuition in part or even in full. But between her family and dance practice, Su Xiaolan often missed class, so she had a hard time getting along with her peers and didn’t have any friends. Wu Guangchuan was her seventh-grade homeroom teacher. Taking advantage of her social isolation, he repeatedly enticed and coerced her, then violated her.”

“If Wu Guangchuan kidnapped and killed six girls, why did he let her live? That’s kind of unusual,” Tao Ran noted.

“I’d only just entered the force at the time of the case, and I was just an errand-runner for the special investigation team, so I wasn’t very involved,” Deputy Lu said, thinking back. “The killer was dead, so we couldn’t question him. All our conclusions were just based on the more senior officers’ deductions after the fact. But there were two possible reasons. One: Many people knew that Su Xiaolan and Wu Guangchuan were very intimate. If anything happened to her, the police would likely have found out about him, so for the killer, Su Xiaolan was a highly risky target. One officer even suggested that, to Wu Guangchuan, the other six girls were just substitutes for Su Xiaolan. The second possibility was just a guess, but among the seven girls, Su Xiaolan's family situation was unique. The culprit couldn't torture her family with a phone call. So if those phone calls held some special significance for the culprit, he couldn't have gotten that satisfaction in Su Xiaolan's case."

Luo Wenzhou nodded. The entire thought process seemed sound. They had a witness and physical evidence, and they'd identified appropriate logic and motives in the killer. The only problem was that the killer from twenty years ago was dead, so who had taken Qu Tong? And who else knew about the pencil case and the bells?

Perhaps only Guo Fei's family…and the old officers who'd worked on the case originally, including Deputy Lu.

Facing Deputy Lu, everyone else in the meeting room fell silent, but Deputy Lu himself was unperturbed. Patting Luo Wenzhou on the shoulder, he broke the silence by telling the younger officer, "You should be in charge of this. If you run into any problems, report them to Lao-Zeng. I'll step back to avoid any conflicts of interest, and I'll write down where I've been these last few days. I imagine it could be tricky for you all to investigate the other guys who handled this case, so I'll give them a heads-up about you to keep them from taking it as an insult and refusing to cooperate."

"We'll also have to talk to the families of victims from the Lianhuashan case," Luo Wenzhou said, navigating the awkwardness with ease. "It's possible they said something to someone. Also, Su Xiaolan was with Wu Guangchuan for the longest, so she might know something. The three of us should split up. Tao Ran, continue tracing where those eighteen kids have been. Look into the boys' whereabouts too, just in case. Xiao-Lang, you're in charge of investigating Qu Tong's place. Bring a team with you, and make sure you check all the security footage from nearby stores and shops. Leave the rest to me.”

All that was left was work that had the potential to offend, whether by investigating senior veteran cops or by visiting past victims.

Tao Ran wanted to say something, but Luo Wenzhou raised a hand to stop him. “Go on. Save your breath. It’s been over twenty years. The evidence in that case is long gone, and most of the direct witnesses are dead, so there’s very little hope of finding anything on that end. It’s *your* work that’s of the utmost importance. What if that kid’s still alive?”

Now that Luo Wenzhou had put it that way, Tao Ran didn’t dare delay further. He and Lang Qiao both left.

Lu Youliang ripped open another pack of cigarettes and pushed it toward Luo Wenzhou. “Leaving the honorable-yet-difficult work to yourself. Strong work ethic.”

Luo Wenzhou accepted the cigarettes, put one between his lips, then stuffed the rest unceremoniously into his pocket. “If I go, I’ll get some attitude at worst. If they go, someone might physically kick them out. Of course, whether I achieve any results after suffering through that attitude will all depend on you.”

“Those guys from back then have mostly either left, died, or worked here their entire lives and all retired. And now Lao-Zhang’s been transferred,” said Deputy Lu, a little melancholic. “I’m the only one left leading you bunch of rascals. I haven’t got too many years remaining before I retire too.”

“Isn’t retirement good?” Luo Wenzhou chuckled. “I dream of retiring. Wake up without an alarm, go wherever I want, get paid every month, travel the world with my partner—and, when I take the subway, the little brats will all have to give me their seat."

Lu Youliang really wanted to help Luo Wenzhou in his career. Luo Wenzhou was a little young, but Deputy Lu didn't plan to retire imminently; if he spent his remaining years mentoring and supporting Luo Wenzhou, there was no reason the sergeant couldn't succeed. Hearing such unambitious talk, however, Deputy Lu was suddenly angry. He pointed at Luo Wenzhou. "You don't even *have* a partner. Shut up. If you're going to keep talking like that, you can scram."

His cigarette in his mouth, Luo Wenzhou picked up the file and got ready to scram.

When he reached the door, Deputy Lu stopped him. "Have you got a general sense of what's going on with this case?"

One hand on the meeting room door, Luo Wenzhou thought about the question. "Two mysteries from twenty years ago were never solved. One: Where did the missing girls' bodies go? Two: What was Wu Guangchuan's motive for calling the parents? I've discussed this case with a friend before, and he said it sounded like Wu Guangchuan's main target wasn't the kids but the parents. That doesn't quite fit the usual psychological profile of a pedophile… I also feel like these two cases are connected, but they might not have been perpetrated by the same person."

"How do you mean?"

"Making a call is a completely different thing from actually going to the victim's home," said Luo Wenzhou. "The former is hidden behind the scenes, and the latter is the action of someone who can't resist the spotlight.

It’s much higher risk, which means the culprit isn’t just much more familiar with how the police go about things, they’re also more arrogant.”

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YANCHENG WAS LIKE A RIVER. After a decade of pollution control, you could now see its bottom; the water was too clear to hide anything. But although the river seemed clean and safe, there were always turbulent rapids and hidden currents.

Qu Tong’s chances of survival were dwindling, but to the missing girl’s peers, this was just a normal summer vacation. It was all boring classes and extracurricular activities. They awaited the drowsy daze of adolescence to the cicadas’ weak, sickly cries.

Chenchen’s parents were running late. She waited for them at a bus stop near the back entrance of the youth center, carrying an art portfolio on her back. Bored, she took out her tablet to play with—and suddenly, a shadow fell over her. She looked up and saw a blind, hunched-over old man approach and turn to face her, seemingly by coincidence.

For some reason, Chenchen felt uneasy and thought of what Fei Du had told her. She carefully moved a few steps to one side, to stand closer to the crowd awaiting the bus, keeping an eye on the man. At that moment, the bus arrived. The crowd of people boarded, leaving the stop empty except for Chenchen and the “blind” man.

He appeared to smile as he approached her, his cane tapping the ground. Chenchen’s hair stood on end. She turned to run back inside the youth center, but as she turned the corner, she bumped into someone and knocked them over. The other person cried out in surprise, spilling the items they'd carried all over the ground.

It was a girl just slightly older than Chenchen. She wore a floral-print dress and had her hair in pigtails. Chenchen hurried to apologize. "S-sorry."

The girl glanced at her, not seeming angry at all, then bent to pick up her books. "Why are you running?"

Chenchen quickly helped her. "There's someone weird over there," she said, pointing. "I'm a little scared."

The other girl glanced in the direction Chenchen pointed. "Where? There's no one there."

Chenchen looked. The bus stop was now empty. There *wasn't* anyone.

The other girl looked at Chenchen. "What grade are you in?"

"I'll be in sixth grade soon."

"Oh, I'm a year older than you." The girl used one arm to hold her books and helped Chenchen up quite naturally with the other. "Are you scared? Why don't I keep you company for a while?"

Chenchen wanted nothing more.

"I take a summer photography class here." The girl looked down at Chenchen with a smile, her long eyelashes fluttering. "My name's Su Luozhan."

Chapter 8

LIANHUASHAN HAD UNDERGONE an entire makeover over the past twenty years, and it now looked nothing like it used to.

The streets and buildings complemented each other; they all had the same modern style, even more stylish than that of Yancheng. The only sign of the area's hasty transformation was that the trees by the roadside had yet to grow into a canopy of green, revealing the hastiness of the area's "makeover."

Luo Wenzhou drove in circles for a bit before he found the unremarkable newsstand. A man wearing reading glasses sat hunched over inside it. He might have been middle-aged, but it was also plausible that he was quite elderly. Going only by his face, he didn't seem to be at retirement age yet—but he had an aura of death about him like a man with one foot in the grave.

It was the hottest part of the afternoon, and the streets seemed almost to sweat under the sun. Luo Wenzhou pushed his sunglasses atop his head and approached the newsstand. "A cold bottle of soda, please."

The newsstand owner set his book aside, bent over, and pulled out a bottle with a thick layer of frost clinging to its surface. Luo Wenzhou stepped under the shade of the newsstand's parasol, twisted open the lid, and downed half the bottle in one gulp. He'd worked overtime, spending the day in battles of wits against his retired colleagues. With Deputy Lu's support, he'd positioned himself as asking about an old case and tried in all kinds of roundabout ways to determine whether there was anything suspicious about the people he'd spoken to. Unfortunately, all of them came from the same system, so they all used the same methods to try to trick information out of each other. All that back-and-forth was like a harem drama—it was exhausting.

Luo Wenzhou's brain now felt wooden, and his eyes were glazed. Shocking himself with the chill of the cold drink, he let himself space out for a while, leaning against the large parasol.

When the newsstand owner realized that he wasn't leaving, he said, "I have ice pops too, young man. Do you want one?"

Luo Wenzhou collected himself and waved a hand at the newsstand owner. "I just filled my stomach up with bubbles—no room for anything else. I'm simply taking a break here."

"All right," the owner replied, then brought out a plastic stool for his customer. "Sit. It's such a hot day, everyone's struggling. What do you do?"

Luo Wenzhou set his bottle down on his knee, then shook it a few times. "I'm a police officer."

The owner, who was stepping back over the newsstand's threshold, froze when he heard the word "police." After a while, he turned back, folding up his reading glasses. "I applied for unsupervised release," he said in a low voice, lips trembling. "The government approved it."

Luo Wenzhou nodded. "I know. I'm not here to cause you trouble, Guo-shu. I just want to talk to you about Feifei's case twenty years ago."

The newsstand owner, Guo Heng, had killed Wu Guangchuan and gone to prison for it. Later, his sentence was commuted, and he'd been released two years prior after serving his reduced sentence without parole. He'd obviously lost his previous job. Twenty years had passed, and everything was different. His family, parents included, had left or passed away, and his wife had separated from him before he even committed the murder. He had no friends or loved ones; he was completely alone. Upon release, he returned to find Lianhuashan unrecognizable, but he'd opened a small business to sustain himself.

"There's nothing to say." Guo Heng's face darkened. "She's been dead twenty years, and I personally sent her killer on his way. Then I was put on trial and did my time. That's all. What more do you want?"

Luo Wenzhou tried to take an even softer tone. "Look, I'm not here to pour salt into your wounds for fun. We have a case now where another little girl has disappeared. There are signs that the two cases are linked."

"What signs?" Guo Heng asked coldly.

"The missing girl is eleven, and when she disappeared, she was wearing a floral dress. Three days after she went missing, the culprit sent the parents a recording. In addition to the girl's cries, there were other noises, like someone shaking a metal box of bells." Knowing that Guo Heng had his guard up, Luo Wenzhou tried to look frankly into his eyes. He left out unnecessary details, explaining everything as concisely as possible. "A more experienced colleague who was there for that case twenty years ago says that the circumstances are the same as when Feifei was kidnapped, so I wanted to come ask you—"

"Ask?" Guo Heng said curtly. "More like interrogate. The killer's dead. The only people who remember that case are me and the police. Of course, a police officer would never do anything bad, so it must be me, the one with a history."

"I'm not just talking to you. I already visited all the officers who worked on the case," Luo Wenzhou said, his tone unchanging. "I don't suspect you of anything. I just want to get a detailed understanding of what —”

Without warning, Guo Heng exploded at Luo Wenzhou. “Back then, I begged anyone at all to listen, and none of you would!” he roared. “Now that I’ve killed a man and gone to jail, you come asking about it?! My daughter’s been dead more than twenty years! I don’t want to talk about her. I don’t want to think about her! What the fuck were you all doing back then?!”

Luo Wenzhou opened his mouth, but just barely managed to swallow down the excuses on his tongue. He just said in a low voice, “I’m sorry.”

“Leave! Go! Get lost!” Guo Heng grabbed Luo Wenzhou’s shoulder and tried to push him away. “I have nothing to say. If you think I’m suspicious, come arrest me. That’s nothing new to me anyway. There’s nothing to tell you beyond that. Next time, remember to show your badge as soon as you arrive! If I knew you were a police officer, I wouldn’t have sold you so much as a drop of spit.”

“Guo-shu…”

Guo Heng’s eyes were red, and a vein at his temple throbbed. “Fuck off!”

Luo Wenzhou wasn’t known for his patience and understanding. But at this moment—however bad his temper—he just couldn’t get angry. As the blazing sun beat down on him, he shut his mouth and ran the tip of his tongue over his teeth, counting each one of them. Then he took out his wallet, retrieved a photo, and handed it to Guo Heng.

“This girl’s name is Qu Tong,” he said. “Come fall, she’ll be in sixth grade. Her grades are good, and she was participating in Number Sixteen

Junior High's recruitment summer camp a year early. She's mature for her age, and she's always been part of her class council. But she's been missing for five days now. You must know what that means, Guo-shu. I've heard that you studied a lot of child kidnapping cases back then, so you must recognize that the chances of finding her at this point are minimal."

Guo Heng's gaze slowly fell on Qu Tong's photo. The two men faced each other under the summer sun, the past twenty years like a chasm between them. After a long time, Guo Heng's ragged breathing finally calmed.

"We can't give up until we've at least found her body," Luo Wenzhou said. "Those kids whose bodies were never found were so unfortunate. We can't let what happened to Guo Fei happen again. But we've got no other clues, so I had no choice but to come ask you for help. Do we have to wait until this bastard has kidnapped seven children and left behind some clue for this to end?"

Guo Heng's expression changed slightly. The girl in the photo smiled at him, her head cocked slightly, revealing one crooked tooth. It could just have been coincidental, but when he looked carefully, he actually saw some similarities between Qu Tong and Guo Fei.

Luo Wenzhou's tone grew even more gentle. "I just have a few questions, and after that, I'll leave. I won't bother you."

Guo Heng glanced at him and pursed his lips, not saying anything for a while. Then he turned to walk into the newsstand.

Luo Wenzhou hurried in after him. "Have you ever mentioned that pencil case full of bells to anyone?"

“Yes.” Guo Heng had gotten too emotional earlier, and now his voice was a little hoarse. “I told the officer handling the case. After you guys gave up, I also told the friends and relatives who kept helping me investigate.”

“Can you list them?”

Guo Heng gave him a look. Just as Luo Wenzhou thought he might explode again, the man instead curled up in his chair and rubbed his face as if fatigued. “Feifei’s homeroom teacher. A relative who was working at the telephone exchange then. Oh… A few sanitation workers near the garbage dump where the phone call was made. They probably all know a few things. It’s all mixed up in my head now, though. I repeated the same thing to so many people, I don’t really remember anymore.”

“Then let’s start from the beginning.” Luo Wenzhou took out a palm-sized notebook and sat down on the stool Guo Heng had brought out earlier. “Where did you start investigating? And how did you find Wu Guangchuan?”

Guo Heng looked past Luo Wenzhou at a little mirror on the newsstand door. The mirror reflected his aged face and white hair, driving home just how much time had passed. He glanced at Luo Wenzhou—if his young daughter were still alive, she might even be a few years older than this cop.

“The police investigation never went anywhere. I was so worried that I had to look into things myself. I went to that garbage dump a few times—the place the culprit had called from. Back then, they often didn’t get rid of garbage on schedule, so the stench was awful. There weren’t any residences nearby or bus routes that passed through, so anyone going there had to drive. And if you came from the county seat, there was a toll gate. There hadn’t been many cars on the road on the day of the call, and the police had looked into each car’s route. If anything was suspicious, they would’ve found out. I thought maybe the kidnapper was from out of town, because there’s only one highway from Yancheng to Lianhuashan; it goes around the mountain, and it happens to pass the dump. There’s no connecting road, but there’s a big hill that slopes down to there. I went to take a look. You wouldn’t be able to drive a car down to the dump, but any adult would be able to walk down.”

“You’re saying that Guo Fei’s kidnapper left Lianhuashan with her, then for some reason stopped in the middle of the highway, climbed down half a hill with the kid, and made that call using the phone at the nearby dump? Why?” Luo Wenzhou asked.

Guo Heng sneered. “When I told the police this all those years ago, they asked ‘Why?’ in that exact same tone.”

“I’m not dismissing you.” Luo Wenzhou wasn’t here to argue with Guo Heng. He reorganized his thoughts, then said very calmly, “Following your logic, the kidnapper wasn’t from Lianhuashan. It’s true that Wu Guangchuan was an outsider, and based on our investigation, he didn’t stay in Lianhuashan long. So how did he become familiar with a dump that even the locals barely went to? On top of that, he kidnapped an eleven-year-old, not an infant weighing only a few pounds. Abandoning his car in the middle of the highway, then climbing down to an unfamiliar place with a kidnapped child to assault her—that would have been way too risky. How would he know that no scavengers or sanitation workers would pass by? It wouldn’t have made sense.”

“Did your ‘sense’ catch the criminal?” Guo Heng shot back.

Luo Wenzhou had nothing to say to that.

“The police told me it was impossible back then too. But they formed a special investigation team just for the case. I figured that team would be way smarter than me, so I left everything to them and waited for their results. Except… Ha!” Guo Heng laughed derisively. “Eventually, I really had no other option. I had to follow my ‘impossible’ hunch. I went to Feifei’s school, and I asked staff at all the nearby guesthouses and hotels. Her teacher helped a lot too—she was an old lady who’d come out of retirement when she was teaching Feifei. She’s already passed away, so she definitely isn’t who you’re looking for.”

“In the process, you found Wu Guangchuan. He was in Lianhuashan recruiting students at the time, but I heard that he was in the hospital when the crime occurred. Why did you suspect him?”

“Brocade was well-off. Their teachers came in different cars, but at the same time. After their job was done, though, they all left separately. Some left earlier because of family responsibilities, some stayed longer to visit the karst cave in Lianhuashan, and some got sick and left halfway through. I found the cheapest accommodation near Brocade and followed each of them. I didn’t suspect Wu Guangchuan at first, but at one point, I was just strolling around the area, and I saw a kid tailing him sneakily.”

Luo Wenzhou instinctively sat up a little straighter.

“It was a boy wearing the Brocade uniform. He said that he was the class representative, and his homeroom teacher had asked him to find out why a female classmate of his kept missing classes. When she skipped class, she didn’t go home. He saw the girl meet Wu-laoshi after class once, but when he went to ask Wu Guangchuan, he denied it. I thought that was suspicious," Guo Heng explained. Luo Wenzhou's brow twitched slightly.

Guo Heng looked at him, then suddenly asked, "Are you married?"

"No."

"Then you wouldn't understand." Guo Heng shook his head. "If you had a kid—a daughter—who'd just disappeared one day, you'd be as sensitive as I am."

"You also told an officer who transferred from Lianhuashan into the city?"

"Yes. His family name was Yang. He'd worked at the Lianhuashan Public Security Bureau before. He was the only person I knew in Yancheng," said Guo Heng. "He didn't believe me, though."

Luo Wenzhou didn't try to explain for his shifu, just asked, "And then what happened?"

"I had to investigate myself, but that boy from Brocade helped me a lot. One day, he paged me, and I rushed to him just in time to see Wu Guangchuan dragging a struggling little girl away." Despite how much time had passed, Guo Heng clenched his fist as he recounted this. "I told the boy to leave, and then I followed Wu Guangchuan to his home, watching him drag the girl all the way. Then he did a bunch of…disgusting things right at his front door. I… I…"

Guo Heng's chest heaved. He couldn't continue. According to the case file, after Wu Guangchuan pulled the girl inside, Guo Heng knocked on his door, pretending to be there to collect electricity fees, then stabbed him.

"What was the boy's name?"

“Xu…” Guo Heng had to think about it for a while. “I think…Xu Wenchao.”

After Luo Wenzhou bade Guo Heng goodbye, he sent a hasty text to Tao Ran, asking him to summon Su Xiaolan and Xu Wenchao—both of whom had attended Brocade Junior High twenty years ago—for questioning. Then he sped back to the city.

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As it happened, Fei Du had left the city that same day.

“You’re the Mr. Fei who made an appointment yesterday, right?” As she looked through the records, the receptionist secretly examined the handsome guest. “Let me take a look.”

This care home was next to mountains and the sea, and it had an artistic garden. It was a medical facility, but the reception hall was free of the smell of medicine and the stench of patients. The windows were clean and bright, beautiful receptionists spoke in soft tones, and the calming sounds of waves and piano music were audible nearby.

At first blush, it was more like a beachside resort.

“Intensive care ward, Room 407. This way, please. Someone will show you there.”

“Thank you.” Fei Du nodded at her, then casually picked a dewy lily out of his bouquet and placed it in the vase at the reception desk. “I think this flower suits you.”

Pretty much everyone in the intensive care ward had lost their mobility, and most were in long-term comas. Thus, a distinctive quiet blanketed the area. Medical staff bustled this way and that, and the thick foliage outside the window cast heavy shadows. Fei Du grabbed his visitor’s pass and headed to Room 407. A doctor already waiting there greeted him. “Fei-zong,” he said with familiarity, “I guessed that you’d be coming today.”

“I happen to have some free time these days.” Fei Du put the flowers next to a man’s bed. “How is he?”

“Generally stable, but it’s already been three years. It’s not likely he’ll ever wake up. You should prepare yourself.”

The doctor was being polite. By “not likely” he meant “nearly impossible.” Fei Du made a noise of acknowledgment, then tilted his head to observe the man in the bed. “I know,” he said cordially. “I appreciate all your hard work.”

The doctor met his eyes and was momentarily shocked. For a second, it didn’t look as though the young man’s cold, searching gaze was aimed at his father, or even a living human being at all—he had the look of someone peering at an unsatisfactory decoration. His gaze seemed to contain traces of judgment and apathy. In his imagination, the doctor was envisioning a whole series titled something like *The Rise and Fall of the Wealthy* or *The Usurper*, and didn’t dare say anything more. He bade Fei Du farewell and beat a hasty retreat.

Fei Du politely watched him leave, then put his hands behind his back and circled the bed a few times. The middle-aged man lay there unconscious, surrounded by an overwhelming amount of medical equipment. He had clearly been well taken care of; there wasn’t a single white hair on his head. His features closely resembled Fei Du’s, handsome to the point of flawlessness, but he gave off a completely different aura. Even lying there motionless, he gave off a dark, sharp feeling, like a cold chunk of marble.

Fei Du stopped in the corner of the room. There was a little calendar there. Perhaps a nurse had been careless; it still showed the date from a few days ago. Fei Du flipped it to the right date—the last day of July.

It was his birthday, in fact. But one of the two people responsible for his birth lay here in this room, and the other lay beneath the earth.

Fei Du turned around, staring at the man with an unreadable gaze. Suddenly, he reached for his oxygen tube.

The medical equipment in the quiet room let out regular beeps and noises. The young man who’d only just given a girl a flower now had no trace of warmth on his face.

Chapter 9

FEI DU TWISTED the oxygen tube gently, then abruptly smiled. Turning, he blew a kiss at the security camera. “Just messin’ with you.”

He bent down and pulled out a card from a little table to the side. This expensive care home offered a unique service: When patients were physically unable to communicate, their families sometimes felt that just monologuing at them was an inadequate way to express their feelings, so the facility always had paper and pens for the families to write with. That way, their feelings could take a more tangible form. Fei Du gave the man on the bed a withering glance, then wrote simply, with no salutation or sign-off, *I hope you can hold on for a few more years.*

The care home’s price was no joke. The man’s annual medical costs were enough to pay the salaries of several doctors and nurses. Perhaps some people only benefited those around them in their last few years, when they lay in bed unconscious.

The scorching sun blazed outside the window, but the air conditioning in the intensive care ward kept the temperature the same year-round. Between that and the shade cast by the lush, spreading greenery outside, it almost felt a little chilly.

Once he’d expressed his feelings—*I’m happy to see you suffer*—it was like Fei Du had completed an annual ritual. He drove back to Yancheng alone. Even when there was no traffic, the drive from Haibin Care Facility was over four hours.

Fei Du had told Dr. Bai that he'd pick up a book from her that evening. He'd officially concluded his regular appointments, but he maintained a friendship with the therapist, visiting with gifts every so often and borrowing books that she recommended.

If nothing else came up, then his plans for his twenty-second birthday included driving for hours, visiting someone in a coma, borrowing a book on mental illness, going home and reading it until midnight, and then getting some rest. Usually, Fei Du liked to go wherever was busiest, but all his close friends knew that he generally shouldn't be contacted on his birthday, the anniversary of his mother's death, or during holidays. Even Zhang Donglai, who had no decorum or tact, stayed away during those times—not that he'd have been able to bother Fei-zong anyway, since Fei Du's phone would be off the entire day and no calls would reach him.

The highway back to Yancheng was congested, so Fei Du got back an hour later than planned. A little tired, he tried to keep himself awake by listening to the radio. The Yancheng police happened to be putting out a call that day for information from the general populace regarding Qu Tong's disappearance.

"…especially around schools, youth centers, summer classes, and summer camps. If you notice anyone suspicious, please call the police immediately… Also, a reminder to parents: It is currently summer vacation, so please be vigilant about your children's safety…"

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"HOW DID THAT PROGRAM END UP going into the dangers of swimming in the wild?"

Having run around outside all day, Luo Wenzhou finally returned to the municipal bureau just before the workday ended. He felt like his soul was about to evaporate out of the top of his head. Mercilessly, he dumped someone else's tea into his own cup and drank it all.

Lang Qiao ran over, but it was too late to stop him. "Boss, that's my diet tea!" she screamed.

Luo Wenzhou paused for a moment, then downed the rest of the cup without so much as a change in expression. At this point, he'd have drunk any liquid, even insecticide. When he was done, he wiped his mouth. "Did you guys find anything at Qu Tong's place? And did you find Xu Wenchao or Su Xiaolan?"

"We checked all the footage from store cameras near Qu Tong's apartment," Lang Qiao replied. "In a single day, more than forty different people visited on business alone—real-estate agents, delivery drivers with parcels and milk and food and whatever else. Good thing they all wore uniforms. I called and confirmed their identities and whereabouts with their companies. Four of them were suspicious, and they've been brought here for questioning. We've also made a list of everyone who entered or left the neighborhood outside rush hour. There's more than eighty of them, and we're currently checking their addresses with the neighborhood committee."

Hearing about the workload almost made Luo Wenzhou's overheated brain explode. It was a good thing the municipal bureau had enough hands on deck. Who knew how long it would take to go through all that otherwise?

“We’ve already found Xu Wenchao,” Lang Qiao added. “Tao Ran’s talking to him inside. Su Xiaolan couldn’t come—she’s gone.”

“Gone?” Luo Wenzhou was confused. “You mean she moved out of town? Maybe even abroad?”

“No… She’s not just gone from the country. She’s gone from this *world*—she’s dead.”

Luo Wenzhou froze. “Dead? How old was she? How can she already be dead?”

“After her involvement in that case, Su Xiaolan’s life was basically over. She never got anywhere with dance, and her grades weren’t adequate. She just barely got into a vocational high school and dropped out halfway through. She had no proper career, so she took advantage of her beauty and youth and just hung around various wealthy people for a while. She had a child out of wedlock in her teens, and the rest of her life continued along those chaotic lines. Apparently, she suffered from a lot of ailments and passed away two months ago—here are the details.”

Lang Qiao handed Luo Wenzhou a very thin file. It didn’t take long to read through it. Su Xiaolan’s life had been too short; there really wasn’t much to say. The file contained her former address, contact information, and two records of disciplinary action at school. It also included details on a public nuisance charge that stemmed from an instance of being drunk and disorderly. That had landed Su Xiaolan in jail briefly. Finally, the file contained a death certificate.

The last thing in the file was a photo taken not long before Su Xiaolan’s death. In it, she was only thirty or so years old, but she looked like her brief time on earth had ground her down. Her gaunt cheeks clung tight to her skull, her chin was very sharp, and wrinkles already bracketed her mouth. Remnants of half-removed makeup lingered on her face. It required a close look to spot traces of the beautiful girl from all those years prior.

In the long hallway, Luo Wenzhou and Lang Qiao stared at each other for a while. This had been the fate of the last…survivor.

“You know, Sergeant Luo, sometimes when I see this kind of thing, it makes me think that life is actually very ugly,” Lang Qiao mused.

Luo Wenzhou whacked the back of her head with the file’s manila envelope. “If you have so many thoughts, go write a book. What are you doing here as an officer of the law? Right now, our priority is finding Qu Tong. Tell me, what does this Xu Wenchao do for a living?”

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XU WENCHAO WAS a freelance videographer. He was very tall and seemed gentle and refined—an arguably appealing man. Understandably, he was a little nervous about being asked to come to the police station, and he kept fidgeting under the table.

Tao Ran poured him a cup of water. “We have no ulterior motives here. We just want to ask you to take a little trip down memory lane.”

Xu Wenchao bowed his head and pursed his lips. He accepted the water and thanked Tao Ran without making eye contact.

From their spot in front of the security monitor, Luo Wenzhou and Lang Qiao heard Tao Ran ask gently, “You went to Brocade Junior High?”

Xu Wenchao took a graceful sip of water. “Yes.”

“Do you remember your classmate Su Xiaolan?”

Xu Wenchao’s finger twitched. After a long silence, he said with difficulty, “Yes.”

“Can you tell me about her?”

There was no ambiguity to this question, but Xu Wenchao didn’t seem to understand. He froze for a moment. “Huh?”

“Talk about Su Xiaolan.”

“Oh.” Xu Wenchao balled a hand into a fist on his knee, then pinched his knuckles forcefully. “I-I haven’t talked to her in years. But she…she was a very happy, bright girl.” He searched through his memories, then managed to squeeze out, “She had long hair, and she liked to wear floral dresses.”

Everyone’s faces went tight—Tao Ran’s, Luo Wenzhou’s, and those of the others observing through the cameras.

Xu Wenchao suddenly stopped, looking back and forth between Tao Ran and the clerk taking notes. “You guys didn’t just call me here to ask about a middle-school classmate, right? It’s about that girl on the radio, isn’t it? I heard about that on the way here.”

“I’ll get straight to the point, then,” said Tao Ran. “What do you know about the case of Wu Guangchuan, who kidnapped, sexually assaulted, and murdered young girls?"

Xu Wenchao gathered his thoughts for a few moments. "Not much. I was still young at that time. Adults don't usually let children know too much about that kind of thing."

"One victim's father said that Su Xiaolan was saved because you contacted him in the nick of time."

"Uh… That was twenty years ago. I don't really remember."

"One of the fathers affected by the serial kidnapping case went to Brocade to investigate your teachers," Tao Ran explained patiently. "He ran into you following Wu Guangchuan, so he asked you. You guys both suspected that Wu Guangchuan was up to no good, so you investigated him together. Do you remember that?"

Xu Wenchao was silent for a full minute. "Maybe," he said finally. "Not really."

Talking to him was incredibly difficult, but the police couldn't force him to speak any more quickly—he wasn't a criminal. All they could do was wait. He almost spoke as if he had some sort of intellectual disability—he needed to think about every answer for a long time, and then he gave only a vague reply, like "Maybe," "Really?" "Perhaps," or "I'm not sure."

They went back and forth like this, with Tao Ran asking him tons of questions, for over an hour. In the process, Tao Ran drank two bottles of water. Xu Wenchao diligently played his part as the clueless fool with a distinct air of ethereal melancholy.

"I really want to hit him. Think he's suspicious, Boss?" Lang Qiao asked.

“Just because he mentioned the words ‘floral dress’?” Luo Wenzhou shook his head. “Schools back then were pretty strict. Everyone had to wear a uniform, and girls had to have either neat ponytails or short bobs. But the standards were relaxed slightly for specific specialized students if their craft required a particular appearance. With all the other girls looking like plain country bumpkins and only Su Xiaolan wearing dresses with her long hair down, it’s natural that he’d remember those details. But…”

Inside the room, Tao Ran told Xu Wenchao, “I just think it’s a little weird. Wu Guangchuan’s case caused a huge commotion back in the day. You participated in it firsthand, so how come you don’t remember?”

Xu Wenchao smiled gently. “In junior high, I ran a really serious fever that wouldn’t break. I nearly died. I survived in the end, but it caused at least a little damage to my brain. My memory really suffered after that, and my reaction times have been very slow ever since. I’m sorry, Officer.”

The explanation sounded reasonable. Tao Ran shook his head helplessly. “Mr. Xu, are you married?”

Xu Wenchao shook his head.

“Where were you on the night of the twenty-seventh?”

This time, Xu Wenchao answered without hesitation. “At home.”

“By yourself?”

“Of course. I’m single.”

“What were you doing at home?”

“Reading. It was a book about photo composition.”

Tao Ran’s gaze sharpened slightly. “Can we access your dashcam for our investigation, Mr. Xu?”

“Certainly. It’s just outside.” Xu Wenchao pulled out his car keys, meeting Tao Ran’s eyes easily. “Have you got other questions? If we’re done, I can leave, right? I have work tomorrow, and I need to go home to prep.”

Tao Ran looked toward the camera. In his ear, Luo Wenzhou’s voice said, “Let him go. I’ve already arranged to have him under twenty-four-seven surveillance once he leaves.”

Tao Ran stood and shook Xu Wenchao’s hand. “Yes. Thank you for your cooperation. Let me walk you to the door.” Xu Wenchao visibly relaxed. Tao Ran gestured to usher him out, and he was leaving when Tao Ran said quietly and casually—as if it were idle chitchat—“I bet private schools are pretty strict. I hear the teachers are desperate for every student to make it to the next grade.”

“They just want you to study harder. It’s all right once you get used to it.”

“That means there’s no time for relationships, right? If you say an extra word to a girl, at least eight teachers will be watching. You have to keep a crush hidden.” Tao Ran gave Xu Wenchao a look, one hand on the doorframe. “Did you like anyone back then, Mr. Xu? A dancer like Su Xiaolan must’ve really stood out from the class, right?”

Xu Wenchao’s expression suddenly changed. He started picking nervously at the seam of his pants. Eventually, he forced a smile. “What guy didn’t like a pretty girl when they were young? But she’s passed away now, so talking about it is pointless. No need to see me out, Officer.”

Tao Ran smiled and nodded, saying no more. He’d only learned Su Xiaolan was dead when he tried to summon her to the station, and he’d never mentioned it to Xu Wenchao. Had Xu Wenchao, who “hadn’t talked to her in years,” heard that news from a classmate he was still friendly with, or…?

Xu Wenchao left quickly without looking back. Meanwhile, the officers on stakeout duty had already organized their shifts. Under cover of darkness, they silently followed him out.

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IT WAS PAST EIGHT O’CLOCK when Luo Wenzhou left the municipal bureau with slightly heavy footsteps.

He didn’t go straight home, however. Deputy Lu had said he would stay away to avoid a conflict of interest, but this situation was a far cry from what had happened with Director Zhang. Zhang Donglai was a relative of Director Zhang’s who’d been under significant suspicion. Deputy Lu, in contrast, had only been present for an old case. He hadn’t even been the one in charge of it. A person less meticulous than Deputy Lu might not even have bothered to step away.

Still, as his careful boss’s subordinate, Luo Wenzhou couldn’t be too relaxed, especially after he’d gone around questioning all those retired officers with Deputy Lu’s support. He decided to bring a box of peaches that he’d bought in Lianhuashan to Deputy Lu as an excuse to drop by and update him on the case. He called Deputy Lu and didn’t mention the case—only the peaches.

Lu Youliang agreed readily and gave him an address. “My wife’s coworker is getting married, and she didn’t tell me beforehand, so I’m visiting my sister’s place to mooch a meal off of her. You can just come here.”

Luo Wenzhou plugged Sunrise Road, North Yancheng into his car GPS.

***

FLASHING HIS CAR LIGHTS, Fei Du saw that the road sign said that it was one more mile to Sunrise Road. He sighed. With all the congestion everywhere, the drive had taken six hours. There hadn’t even been any rest stops. His sore back had gone numb. Only now was the traffic letting up a little. Fei Du stepped on the gas, bringing his car to the speed limit and pondering how to apologize to Dr. Bai for being late.

But as he merged into a lane and was about to turn onto a side road, a car rushed at him out of nowhere. It didn’t brake as it approached him; in fact, it sped up. There was no time to veer away. Fei Du stomped on the brake.

His car shook violently, and noise exploded in his ears. The airbag pushed him back into the seat, and his vision went black as his organs did somersaults inside him. A sharp pain shot down his left arm. His consciousness went a little fuzzy for a couple of seconds. Then the sharp sounds of car honks and voices jolted him back to reality.

Someone sprinted over, yelling, and yanked open his car door. Muggy summer air flooded in.

For a wild instant, a thought flashed through Fei Du’s muddled brain: *Payback sure came quickly.*

***

LUO WENZHOU HAD JUST BEEN appreciating the relatively light traffic when it stopped flowing again; he’d come across an accident just up ahead. He sighed heavily and craned his head out the window just like everyone else. That was when he spotted an SUV much larger than the other cars stuck on the road, sticking out like a sore thumb.

His heart lurched in his chest. Wasn’t that the same model Fei Du had once brought to show off to Tao Ran?

Chapter 10

A SHEEN OF COLD SWEAT clung to Fei Du's temples, either from the heat or the pain. His face as white as a sheet, he squeezed a sentence out between his teeth: "Are you done?"

At his side stood Luo Wenzhou, wearing an expression so sorrowful he could've been in mourning. Two seconds later, though, Luo Wenzhou couldn't hold it anymore. He turned to the side and burst into laughter.

"Young man, this is not good," the old orthopedic doctor chided as he dealt with Fei Du's broken left arm. "You young people need better lifestyle habits," he prattled. "You go out at night and don't exercise—just play on the computer. How can you stay healthy doing that? I just don't get it. Is it really all that fun? Don't think being young will save you. Plenty of twenty- and thirty-year-olds have osteoporosis."

Fei-zong, who had never in his life stayed up late playing computer games, felt so unjustly accused that he didn't know what to say.

Near Sunrise Road, a sudden approaching car had hit the passenger side of Fei Du's SUV. The other driver, who had only gotten his license two months ago, had to be taken away in an ambulance. Apparently, his unfamiliarity with the road signs had led him to take a wrong turn, and he unexpectedly found himself facing oncoming traffic. He'd panicked so hard that when he saw Fei Du's SUV—which was larger than a tank—driving toward him headfirst, he hit the gas instead of the brakes. At least, that was the conclusion the traffic police had drawn. Essentially, the accident had been caused by a driving school's lax standards and Fei Du's bad luck.

It was good that Fei Du had been driving such a safe vehicle today and that he had such good reflexes. Those things meant that the other car was damaged much worse than his own, and Fei Du himself was more stunned than hurt—his glasses didn't even break. Of course, those glasses were very strong. Fei-zong's precious body, on the other hand… The impact of the airbag had fractured his left arm, but Fei Du maintained that that was due to his position, not the health of his bones.

The most unfortunate thing was that that asshole Luo Wenzhou had somehow caught him in a rare moment of disarray!

Luo Wenzhou accompanied Fei Du on his day trip to the hospital, and now having heard about the extent Fei Du's injuries—he was laughing helplessly, clutching Fei-zong's indestructible glasses. All the work stress he'd accumulated over the last several days lifted from his heart.

"Doctor, useless one-percenters like him don't play computer games. They go out and enjoy the nightlife." Eager to egg the doctor on, Luo Wenzhou further embellished his slander of Fei Du. "Look at that face. Look how weak he is—proof of his corrupt, decadent life."

The old doctor peered at Fei Du's vampiric complexion through his reading glasses, his eyes as large as a dragonfly's. "Mm. I see it."

Fei Du didn't dignify that with a response.

"I'm going to secure the bone. This isn't a serious fracture—you can come get the cast removed in a few days. In the meantime, make sure not to engage in any strenuous activity. No smoking, no alcohol, no sex," the old doctor warned seriously. "And remember to get enough calcium, young man. Otherwise, in ten years, you'll snap like a cracker!"

For some reason, that last sentence appeared to strike Luo Wenzhou's funny bone. He laughed hysterically, as though he could survive off this joke for the rest of his life. Even as he drove Fei Du home, he kept letting out weird giggles. Fei Du pitied him; he gathered that Sergeant Luo led a very sad, uninteresting life. Beyond being beaten up by his cat, his only entertainment evidently stemmed from lowbrow sources like this.

The pair originally had separate plans—Fei Du with Dr. Bai and Luo Wenzhou with Deputy Lu—but now both had to cancel.

"Left at the next street… You passed it!" Fei Du glanced at him impatiently. "Is your eyesight going, Old Man Luo? Do you even know how to follow the GPS?"

"Oh, you didn't notice that I kidnapped you and I'm about to sell you off? I've already found a buyer." Luo Wenzhou continued down the wrong street until he reached a shopping center. He parked, then waved at Fei Du. "Let's go. The buyer is waiting to inspect the goods just ahead."

"Then package me up nicely before you sell me, please." Looking grumpily at his wrinkled shirt, Fei Du tried to move, but his whole body felt like it was covered in bruises. Everything hurt, so he sat motionlessly and said in a lifeless tone, "Can you tell the buyer to come here? I haven't got the energy to move."

Luo Wenzhou just laughed at the way he slumped in the seat, letting him be. He got out of the car and walked off, leaving behind the passenger more fragile than a pair of glasses. Fei Du figured he had some business to take care of on the way. He didn't really care; either way, he was hitching a ride, so he had no right to demand that his driver take him home right away.

He reclined the passenger seat back a little, which took up most of the space in the car. Now he was nearly horizontal, his eyes half closed.

In the relentless fog of pain, he thought back to the accident. Misreading a road sign, mistaking the gas pedal for the brake… Those were common errors. Was this deliberate, or had it resulted from panicked mistakes? No one could say for sure, and the only difference was that the former was attempted murder, and the latter was an accident. From that perspective, a car really made an excellent murder weapon.

Fei Du was still stuck in the depths of his own conspiracy theory when the car door opened. Luo Wenzhou was back. Fei Du glanced at him carelessly and was shocked to see an over-the-top cake box in his hand, covered in pictures of candles and stupid cartoon characters. Fei Du leaned away from it automatically, as if the thing in Luo Wenzhou's hands wasn't a cake box but a bomb.

"What are you cowering for? Have you never seen a birthday cake? It isn't going to molest you." Luo Wenzhou set the cake down. "You gave your ID to the guy who dealt with the accident, remember? Don't tell me the birth date on it was wrong."

Fei Du seemed even stiffer than the cast on his arm. He'd apparently gone into flight mode, yet in the end, he didn't end up running. Sitting in the car surrounded by Luo Wenzhou's mix of pop and folk music, Fei Du remained frozen until Luo Wenzhou parked at his own building.

"The doctor said to avoid smoking, alcohol, and sex. And don't go wandering around outside now that you're in a cast. Experience how an elderly man would live his golden years." Luo Wenzhou tilted his chin toward Fei Du. "Get out."

Fei Du gazed at him for a while with an unreadable expression, then carefully lifted his injured arm and wiggled out of the car in an exceptionally uncoordinated manner. After that, he walked so slowly that Luo Wenzhou had to keep stopping and waiting for him to catch up.

"Seriously, Young Master? Good thing I live on the first floor. Otherwise, I'd have to carry you up."

Fei Du remained silent and didn't bite back. He was like a cat that had set foot outside its territory for the first time. Every muscle in his body was on high alert as he moved step by step toward Luo Wenzhou's door.

The instant Luo Wenzhou opened the door, the master of the house poked his small, round head outside to survey things. He seemed to have been waiting there for quite a while. Luo Wenzhou glared at him. "Luo Yiguo! Get back inside! Don't block the way!"

The large cardboard box in Luo Wenzhou's hand was blocking Luo Yiguo's view. The cat could smell cream, and he suspected that this was some new offering from his loyal poop scooper. He stretched out his neck as he reached to scratch at the box, not bothering to be polite at all. That was when he noticed an unfamiliar man behind Luo Wenzhou.

Fei Du and Luo Yiguo exchanged glances. Fei Du, who was fairly reserved, just took a small step back. Luo Yiguo, on the other hand, raised his hackles, let out a scream that didn't seem to have come from a cat, and made a 180-degree turn on all four paws. His claws scraped against the polished floor, his large, marble-like eyes glaring as he pressed himself to the ground. In this "powerful" pose, he turned and made eye contact with Fei Du again. Then he turned tail, stuffed himself into the crevice between the sofa and the floor, and refused to come out.

Luo Wenzhou was speechless. He was kind of embarrassed to have raised such a scaredy-cat.

“No need to take off your shoes,” he told Fei Du, and pointed at the sofa. “Sit wherever you like. The cat wasn’t so scared of strangers before. Last time a coworker came over, he chased them around for the whole visit. How come he’s only afraid of you? Luo Yiguo! Get out here! You’ll get yourself covered in dust and then rub it all over my bed, asshole!”

Luo Yiguo played dead.

“Do you want to be fed or not?!” Luo Wenzhou yelled at the sofa.

This time, Luo Yiguo heard him. Two perky whiskers peeked tentatively from under the sofa. Then, smelling a stranger, the cat shrank back.

Comrade Luo Yiguo was so frightened of Fei-zong that he’d now gone on a hunger strike.

With no other choice, Luo Wenzhou opened a can of wet food and tossed it beside Luo Yiguo’s bowl. Then, after going through his cabinets, he threw a box of candy at Fei Du, who sat stiffly on the sofa. “See whether that’s expired yet. I’m going to go fry up a few random things for dinner. But I’m warning you now, I don’t cater to rich young masters. You’ll have to eat whatever I make, so don’t be as picky as usual.”

For once, Fei Du didn’t object. He was so rigid it looked as though he was sitting not on a sofa, but on one of the Roof of the World’s treacherous mountaintops.

Luo Wenzhou headed back into the kitchen, and Fei Du waited a while before opening the candy box, maneuvering awkwardly with one hand. There were all kinds of weird, intriguing candies inside; this was probably one of those boxes of assorted candies that you'd buy during the new year. Several pieces of chocolate had melted into postmodern shapes that would look utterly unappealing to anyone. At the very bottom of the box was a fairly simple, rough paper bag. Inside was a handful of milk candies. Fei Du froze. He knew what these candies tasted like: Their milk flavor wasn't strong enough, and they always lost their shape and stuck to your teeth.

After Fei Du's mother passed away, the young police officers had often given him these cheap milk candies. He always thought that it was gentle, caring Tao Ran who'd gotten them for him.

Fei Du pulled out a piece out of candy, ripped the wrapper apart with his teeth, and tossed the candy into his mouth. He looked toward the kitchen. The range hood was blasting, and a knife clicked rhythmically against a cutting board. Luo Wenzhou's back appeared every now and again through the doorway.

Luo Wenzhou had claimed that he would just "fry up a few random things," but he actually put in some effort, and he was a pretty good cook. In no time, he'd put together an entire table of dishes, including vegetables and meat. Then he set the cake in the center. After a moment's thought, he put a candle on it.

He looked up and caught Fei Du's gaze, then asked somewhat awkwardly, "What are you looking at? I'm not singing you a birthday song. Do you want to make a wish? You could wish not to be hit by a car on your next birthday or something."

"Okay," said Fei Du.

The pair stared at the cutesy, cartoonish candle for a while. The mood was bizarre, like they were mourning the past or something.

Regretting his efforts immediately, Luo Wenzhou urged, “You’d better blow it out. This is kind of stupid.”

Fei Du was like a living candy jar—he didn’t feel joy unless there were sweets in his life. There weren’t many types of cake he was unfamiliar with, but birthday cake was one of those rare few. He might have had one when he was very young. He remembered there being a lot of guests at his house back then; his birthday had basically just been a spectacle for others. He had only been given a tiny token piece of the exorbitantly expensive cake, and then the confection was taken away. When he asked for another piece the next day, there weren’t any…because the cream had no longer been fresh.

He’d thought about that cake for years. What was the difference between a birthday cake and a regular cake? Just the holes left behind by the candles, technically, but Fei-zong still thought it would taste different.

Luo Wenzhou’s cooking was delicious. The only thing missing from the meal was wine. Following the doctor’s orders, Luo Wenzhou just gave Fei-zong a carton of calcium-fortified milk instead.

Some middle-aged men—perhaps because they’d made too many declarative speeches outside their home—lacked the self-awareness required to rein such speeches in when they came back to their wife and kids. When Luo Wenzhou was younger, he’d hated the lectures his father always delivered before dinner, but after twenty years of those, he’d somehow caught the bug himself. With only Luo Yiguo around, the illness had merely incubated, but now that there was another human at Luo Wenzhou’s dinner table, it had him in its grip.

“Another year has passed,” Luo Wenzhou began. He poured the warm milk into a cup and pushed it at Fei Du, gearing up for a long rant in the same vein as his father’s had been. “Please actually *do* something with your life, young man. How long do you plan to continue like this? Having a lot of material possessions should motivate a man to take on more pursuits, but instead you lie on your pile of gold like a dragon on its hoard. A young person’s life can’t be too empty, or something bad’s bound to happen. You need a dream. Do you have one?”

Fei Du had never experienced this kind of traditional Chinese lecture before, and he found it quite novel. He put a meatball in his mouth, chewed thoughtfully, swallowed, then replied delicately, “World peace.”

“Fuck off,” Luo Wenzhou responded, then continued his tirade. “It’s human nature to seek food and shelter first and foremost, but once those are adequately provided for, and you’ve satisfied your physical needs, you have to seek higher forms of satisfaction, like accomplishments and self-fulfillment. If you keep squandering money on banal sensory pursuits, you’ll just be numbing yourself, and your hidden anxiety will cause you a lot of pain when you’re older. A Maybach today, a Bugatti tomorrow—even if you buy them all, will that ease the deep pain that comes from fighting human nature?”

“No,” Fei Du responded slowly. “But the pain of being unable to afford one might be nearer to the surface.”

Luo Wenzhou, who couldn’t have bought even one such vehicle, glared at him—but noticed the hint of a smile that hung on the corners of Fei Du’s lips. Fei Du was joking with him—even if this particular joke struck a little close to home. “How dare you talk back when a parent is lecturing you? In my family, a brat like you would have to go sit on a stool by the door and write a reflection. Dinner? Don’t even think about it.”

Fei Du’s smile slowly faded, as if Luo Wenzhou’s words had reminded him of something. He was silent for a while, then said, “At my house, no one spoke when we ate. I rarely even saw my father at the dinner table unless we had guests. My mother’s mood was unstable, and she often had an episode halfway through eating. Sometimes she’d throw down her utensils and leave with an unhappy look on her face. Sometimes she’d just start crying at the table.”

Luo Wenzhou froze.

“Eating at my house was a nerve-racking affair.” Fei Du shrugged somewhat helplessly. “When there was a rare evening of peace, it felt like I’d won a prize.”

Luo Wenzhou looked down and put some food in his bowl. He didn’t comfort Fei Du, just said lightly, “That does sound sad. I wonder which is worse: that, or writing a reflection.”

Fei Du looked at him.

“Really—picture it. A beautiful young man of the modern age—me, obviously—hunched by the door like a gorilla. He’s facing the door, writing a reflection on a little stool in front of him. Winter is fine, but in the summer, there’s only a mesh screen, to keep the mosquitos out instead of a door. Everyone outside can see what’s happening in your house. All the neighbors are your parents’ coworkers, and every time they pass by, they look at you and ask, ‘What’d you do this time, boy?’ It was hugely insulting to my character and dignity. I’m telling you, that’s where my shamelessness came from.”

Fei Du laughed in spite of himself.

Luo Wenzhou was warming to his topic. He put down his chopsticks, and he was about to launch into the painful history of his family “revolution” when his phone rang with a call from the station. It cut him off mid-sentence. He had a sudden bad feeling.

“Sergeant Luo.” Tao Ran was panting slightly. “Chang Ning made a report to her local police station. Chenchen’s missing!”

Perhaps Luo Wenzhou was losing his hearing prematurely; he had the volume on his phone cranked way up, which meant Fei Du heard Tao Ran too.

Luo Wenzhou’s expression darkened. “When? Where? Don’t panic. It might not be related to the case.”

“She went to the youth center today for art class. Chang Ning dropped her off at lunch. Chenchen’s parents told her to stay inside the center after class and wait half an hour for her father to pick her up after work. The class ended around four thirty, and her dad called her then. She was still in the classroom. But when he got there after five, she was already gone!”

Chapter 11

"THERE'S NO WAY! That's impossible!" insisted the youth center's administrative director.

It was past midnight, and the man had clearly been pulled out of bed. His eyes were so swollen the flesh nearly reached his eyebrows, his shirt buttons were all in the wrong buttonholes, and he was wearing slippers. "How many kids come and go every day? Our security is very tight. Even parents have to sign in. We have security cameras everywhere with zero blind spots. You say a trafficker got in? Are you kidding? It's absolutely impossible! I'd stake my life on that! A child would have to walk out on their own two legs—not even an alien invasion could get in here!"

"Deputy Tao. We turned on Zhang Yuchen's phone remotely and traced her through the tracking app. She's near White Peach Alley!"

Tao Ran froze. "White Peach Alley," he echoed. "Why would she be there?"

White Peach Alley was about three bus stops from the youth center. It was a famous shopping area that sold all kinds of things in bulk, including clothes and accessories by the pound. There were wholesalers with bags of goods and online-store owners running around. Patrons had to be constantly vigilant to avoid being pickpocketed or scammed. It was too busy and chaotic, and to a child who'd snuck out for fun, there wasn't anything enjoyable in White Peach Alley. On the other hand, a pervert who kidnapped children would find White Peach Alley too crowded with too many eyes. It would be way too risky.

Tao Ran pinched the bridge of his nose. “Let me think.”

He was interrupted as Chenchen’s mother rushed over, pushing two officers aside. “Officer Tao, I heard what you said! You’ve traced Chenchen’s phone, right? Where is she?”

Lang Qiao, who’d only rushed over at midnight, strode over to intervene. She began to console Chenchen’s mother in a soft voice.

“But I told her!” the woman exclaimed. “I told her every day. You have to be careful when you’re outside, not leave with strangers, not go to unfamiliar places. If anything happens, let the adults know. Even *I* thought I was being annoying. I felt like I might’ve talked a layer of skin off my mouth by nagging so much…”

Wiping her own tears, Chang Ning pulled on Chenchen’s mother’s arm. “Don’t say that, Auntie.”

Faced with a crying Chang Ning, Tao Ran felt his stress level jump from merely 30 percent to 100. “Xiao-Qiao-er, stay here and go through the security footage. The rest of you, come with me to White Peach Alley.”

The police cruisers drove like comets through the night, their wheels almost lifting off the ground. White Peach Alley was three bus stops away, but it only took them five or six minutes to get there.

Yancheng was on the verge of changing seasons, and the first batch of autumn clothes was starting to hit the shelves, so White Peach Alley on the verge of turning into “White Knits Alley.” Buyers and sellers were packed in like sardines. Their breath alone practically created an urban heat island. It took less than three minutes of walking through the crowd for a person to be drenched in sweat.

Tao Ran looked around, lost. “Can you pinpoint the area more specifically?” he asked a technician.

“They’re approaching White Peach Alley’s west entrance,” came the response in Tao Ran’s earpiece. “And they don’t know yet that the phone is on. You’ve got to hurry, Deputy Tao.”

Tao Ran gave his subordinates a look, and they immediately split up to approach the west entrance from several directions. Tao Ran scrutinized every single passerby, not to mention garbage trucks, vans, and any bags big enough to hold a human—he didn’t overlook a single possible hiding spot. Although no one had turned on a siren, the air in White Peach Alley grew thick with tension as they searched.

“Deputy Tao, they noticed something,” a technician said suddenly in Tao Ran’s earpiece. “The phone’s been turned off again!”

Tao Ran raked his gaze over his surroundings, and his eyes landed on a large garbage bin. At that moment, a small, thin man near the bin looked up and met his gaze. The man paused, noticed Tao Ran’s uniform, then threw down whatever he’d had in his hand and fled.

The object he’d thrown was a white phone covered in little stickers.

Tao Ran’s eyes widened. “Stop!”

Up ahead, a wholesaler happened to be pushing a cart by. The small man leapt onto the cart with practiced ease, like a monkey, and the wholesaler screamed as the mountain of clothes on the cart fell to the ground in a landslide. A motorcyclist who’d been weaving slowly through traffic braked suddenly to avoid the falling clothes, swearing a blue streak.

Amid all this chaos, the small man had already climbed the fence that ran along the roadside, then flipped over. He was about to reach the other side of the street when a tall, broad officer shot out from a side road. The officer grabbed the man by the back of his collar as if he were catching a little chick. With a twist of his arm, he threw the man to the ground in one easy movement.

Tao Ran turned back to pick the white phone up off the ground, then turned it on. The wallpaper was a cat-filter selfie of Chenchen. Letting out a long breath, Tao Ran walked over to the captured man. “Where is she?”

The man raised his head; he was on the verge of tears. His nose had been injured when he was taken down, and his face was black and blue. “I-I-I was wrong. I promise I’ll never do it again… Ow… Pl-please don’t hurt me…”

Tao Ran grabbed his collar. “I’m asking you—where’s the girl?”

“Huh? Wh-what girl?”

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LUO WENZHOU REACHED the youth center only after Tao Ran and the others had left for White Peach Alley. Seeing his car with its familiar license plate, Lang Qiao rushed over to him. “Boss!”

“What’s happening? Where’s Tao Ran?” asked Luo Wenzhou. He turned to wave at someone in the car, telling them, “Wait in there.”

The passenger ignored him and got out. He had one arm in a sling. Lang Qiao paused, surprised. “Oh…Fei-zong…? Why are you all armored up?”

“Yeah… Please forgive this lowly general’s inability to greet you with the proper formalities,”[8] Fei Du said, glancing up at the buildings near the youth center. “I got into a minor accident. Any news on Chenchen?”

Before Lang Qiao could respond, a police car with its sirens on came to a stop at the youth center’s entrance. Tao Ran and a few other officers got out, their expressions grave.

Tao Ran shook his head at Luo Wenzhou’s questioning gaze. “Chenchen’s phone was stolen by a repeat offender who’d just been released from jail. He said that a girl was tying her shoelaces on the side of the road, and she’d set her phone down on a flower bed’s stone border. After tying her shoes, she just left, forgetting her phone there—so he just ‘picked it up.’”

“Where? When?”

“Probably near the youth center.” Tao Ran raked a hand through his hair, his brow deeply furrowed. “We found seven or eight phones on him that he planned to sell. They’d all been stolen today. He couldn’t even remember exactly when he stole hers.”

“Ge, why are you so panicked?” Fei Du asked from the side. “What is it?”

“I asked Chang Ning. She said that Chenchen was wearing a floral dress today.” Tao Ran’s expression was ugly, his voice low, fast, and worried. “If she really was… The culprit’s kidnapped two kids in five days. That’s way too frequent. And it means that Qu Tong is for sure already… Chenchen was kidnapped after 5:00 p.m., and at this point, it’s been over seven hours. So it’s possible that she’s also…”

Fei Du patted his arm. “Calm down.”

"What do I have to panic about? I'm not her father." Tao Ran laughed bitterly. "I haven't told her family about these suspicions yet—I'm too afraid to. But you said before that that suspicious person was an old man, right? Are you sure?"

"No. We were too far away," replied Fei Du. "Chenchen is sharp. My warning at the time scared her, and I doubt she'd forget so quickly. Even with someone elderly, or someone she was familiar with, I believe she would've had her guard up. And if someone managed to trick her into going outside, she'd still have remembered to message her family."

"Deputy Tao! We found the kid on the art room's security footage!"

Tao Ran whipped around, but before he could go, Luo Wenzhou put a firm hand on his shoulder. "Leave it to me. You take charge of talking to the girl's family. See whether the kid's been acting weird recently, whether her parents have offended anyone, what their relationship with her is like. We can't count out any possibilities."

Beside them, Fei Du was leaning against something. "Do you need my help?"

"In what capacity?" Luo Wenzhou asked him.

"As a member of the victim's friends and family," Fei Du replied shamelessly.

Luo Wenzhou gave him a gentle warning poke but still didn't tell him to go away.

The footage from the art classroom was very clear. Starting at around 4:30 p.m., a steady stream of parents arrived to pick up the other children until only Chenchen was left. She flipped through an art book the teacher had left behind, occasionally looking out the window. Over the course of ten minutes, she spent more time staring out the window than not.

“What’s she looking at?” Luo Wenzhou asked, confused.

“Mirror,” replied Lang Qiao.

Luo Wenzhou looked baffled.

“She’s using the windowpane as a mirror,” Lang Qiao elaborated. “If she was just looking out the window, she’d only have needed to turn her head. She wouldn’t have had to turn and lean in with her entire body. And she’s twirling her hair with her pen. It’s a girl thing—huh?”

Chenchen suddenly sat up so straight that her body left her chair slightly, then smiled, packed up her things, and ran off. The time showing in the corner of the screen was 4:40 p.m.

Luo Wenzhou immediately looked up at the art classroom’s location: Its windows faced the sports field outside. They quickly pulled up the footage from the building closest to the field, then watched Chenchen dart out of a building toward a group of kids on the field. The camera was at a distance, so it only captured her hanging out with the kids there for a short while. After that, Chenchen headed toward a blind spot with a few of the girls, leaving the frame of the camera. Considering the youth center’s layout, the girls had probably gone toward a row of red buildings near the northwestern corner.

“What’s going on?” Luo Wenzhou asked, his brow furrowed. “Didn’t the admin say there were no blind spots?”

“Those red buildings are public washrooms, so there are no cameras.”

“Why didn’t he say anything?! Quick—confirm those kids’ identities and call them all. And someone get me the map.”

There was a little park at the northwestern corner of the youth center, but maintenance there was very lax. Locals had trampled the grass along the park's outer edge, their footprints all mixed up with dog droppings. Nobody ever went deeper into the park, so the vegetation grew enthusiastically, and the insects were nearly as loud as bomber planes.

The police dogs quickly got into place there, barking, as flashlights shone through the trees.

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FEI DU WATCHED THOUGHTFULLY as Tao Ran spoke to Chenchen's father.

"I arrived around 5:05, which is when I told her I'd be there," the man was saying. "When I got there, I didn't see her, so I called her from the entrance. Her phone was off, and I figured it had run out of battery. I signed in to go find her, but the classroom was empty. At that point, I still wasn't thinking that she was lost. This was the youth center—it's basically the same as a school, so I thought she'd gone to the bathroom or run off to play somewhere. I waited angrily in the classroom for a while. I only started to panic when the security guard started checking the doors and windows and shutting off the lights. At that point, I started asking around. I even asked a female teacher to check the bathroom for me…"

Chenchen's mother gripped his shoulder tightly, tears rolling down her face. "You think she'd run off without saying anything when she knew an adult was waiting for her? She's not that kind of kid! How can you call yourself a father? Whenever something happens, you always blame my daughter first. If anything happens to her, I'll…"

Her grip on Chenchen's father made him stumble, and he shut his mouth. Tao Ran and Chang Ning quickly separated them.

"Apparently, that child-tracking app on Chenchen's phone can turn the phone on remotely," Fei Du said suddenly. "That's probably how the officers found it earlier. Why didn't you turn her phone on then?"

"I tried to." Chenchen's father looked like he was about to break down, but managed to keep it together, breathing so harshly that it sounded as though he was barely holding on. "For some reason, the app kept telling me that it couldn't connect to the service… But I'm not great with technology…"

"We found Chenchen's phone," Tao Ran told him. "It still had half its battery life left. It was probably stolen before you first called. Maybe Chenchen noticed that it was missing and went looking for it?"

"You're saying someone stole it from inside the youth center?" Fei Du shook his head. "I doubt it. It would be too risky to try to steal from inside the center. She must've left the park for some reason. Her class ended half an hour before you came to pick her up. She might've bought snacks from a nearby store or gone to play with her classmates…but she probably wouldn't have gone more than half a mile away. She would've wanted to be able to return to the youth center immediately when you called her. Have you taught her what to do if someone steals from her?"

Chang Ning glanced at Tao Ran. "Yes," she said quietly. "When I was joking with her a few days ago, I said that if anything happened, she should go find Tao Ran-gege. She knows how to dial one-ten. And if she can’t do that, she knows to return to the school to find security.”

Tao Ran patted the back of Chang Ning’s hand and gave her a reassuring look. “The areas around the youth center are all busy, and it was rush hour. It should’ve been safe, aside from the middle of the park in the northwest corner…”

“There’s no way…” Chang Ning grabbed Tao Ran’s wrist as though seeking comfort. “Chenchen’s very timid. She can’t even sleep alone after reading a thriller. There’s no way she’d run somewhere isolated.”

“What if she wasn’t alone?” Fei Du said suddenly. “What if she was with her classmates?”

It took everyone a moment to react. They all stared at him blankly.

Fei Du approached Chenchen’s father. “When was the first time you tried to turn on her phone?”

“After…after six,” he said. “Her teacher reminded me.”

“Can you demonstrate?” Fei Du asked quietly.

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“BOSS! THE TEACHER HELPED US contact the kids in the security footage!” Pushing aside a branch in her way, Lang Qiao caught up to Luo Wenzhou. “The kids said they ran to the washroom to change, then went to the park to take photos.”

“Photos?”

“One of the kids in the photography class had an assignment, and he asked the girls to model for him. A few of the girls had brought clothes specifically for that. Afterward, Zhang Yuchen was going to return to the youth center, so the other kids said goodbye at the park entrance. No one knows where she went after that.”

Shit. Luo Wenzhou took a deep breath. If Chenchen realized that her phone had gone missing after saying goodbye to her friends, her first assumption would’ve been that she left it back where they took the photos. She’d have gone back to the empty park to find it. But that park wasn’t monitored like a major road; it would be difficult to find out what happened after that.

Lang Qiao looked worried. “What now, Boss?”

Luo Wenzhou was deep in thought for a while. Then he pulled out his phone and called the people surveilling Xu Wenchao. “Tell me where Xu Wenchao’s been today.”

“Xu Wenchao gave Deputy Tao a copy of his dashcam records and left the station at 5:40 p.m. He drove twenty minutes to a fast-food restaurant, ordered some takeout, and then went home. He hasn’t moved since.”

“You’re sure he’s been home this whole time?” Luo Wenzhou asked quietly.

“Yes. He didn’t shut his curtains; he’s been in the study this whole time. He’s never left our sight. What is it, Boss?”

“Boss, it doesn’t look like Xu Wenchao has anything to do with this case,” Lang Qiao said. “Either we suspected the wrong person, or this case is unrelated to Qu Tong. I’m just baffled. Why are there so many criminals in this world?”

Before Luo Wenzhou could respond, his phone rang. The display said *Feirritating*. “What?”

“I’m with Chenchen’s father right now,” said Mr. Feirritating himself, unhurried. “The thief didn’t steal Chenchen’s phone directly. He really did just pick up the phone she had ‘forgotten.’”

“How do you know?” Luo Wenzhou asked immediately.

“Mr. Zhang tried to turn on Chenchen’s phone remotely at around 6:00 p.m. He couldn’t, but I don’t think that was user error. That must mean either that one of the phones was getting no signal, or the girl’s phone battery had been taken out.” Fei Du paused for a moment. “The thief had no reason to do that if he was going to put the battery back in later, and he probably didn’t know that the phone had a tracking app. I can only think of one possibility: One of the other kids hid her phone while she was changing or posing for photos. When Chenchen noticed, that kid suggested that she return to the park to look for it, and even offered to accompany her.”

Naturally, Chenchen would have trusted her friend and told them that her phone had a GPS-tracking app.

“You’re saying that a kid—quite possibly a girl—planned this.” Luo Wenzhou sucked in a breath. “And not only did this girl kidnap a friend, she tossed the victim’s phone to mislead us? That’s way too…”

Fei Du chuckled ominously.

Luo Wenzhou suddenly remembered that young man from all those years ago, with that dark, icy gaze. He swallowed his words. “How did you think of this?”

"I've warned her about adults: familiar, unfamiliar, men, women, even the elderly," Fei Du replied. "The only people I didn't warn her about were other kids."

Why couldn't it be a kid?

Little girls around ten years old were like flower buds: beautiful and delicate, naive and fragile. The entire world treated them like potential victims, like they were missing a part of their soul or brain. Everyone tried to protect and nurture them. Who would ever suspect one of being a criminal herself?

Luo Wenzhou ended the call with Fei Du and turned to Lang Qiao. "Were any calls made that a parent didn't pick up?"

Lang Qiao looked even more horrified than she had when she tried to catch a knife-wielding criminal unarmed. "I…I think there was *one*…"

Chapter 12

“HELLO—IS THIS SU LUOZHAN? This is Wang-laoshi from the youth center—the one who gave out your registration cards when school started. Remember me?”

“Yes, Wang-laoshi. Good evening.”

“How come you’re up so late? Are your parents there? I’d like to speak to them. There’s something I need to ask you, but I’ll need their permission first.”

“Dad’s not back yet, and Mom’s sick, so she’s sleeping. I can’t wake her up. You can go ahead and ask.”

“Oh, I see… Okay. I’ve just got one simple question. You see, there’s this kid in our art class named Zhang Yuchen. She went missing after school today, but someone said that they saw you two playing together. Do you remember the last place you saw her?”

Silence.

“Hello? Su Luozhan? Are you there?”

“…Yes. Sorry, my place has bad reception. Who did you say it was from the art class?”

“Zhang Yuchen. She’s small, and she wears her hair in a braid.”

“Oh—I know her. We played in the park today. Lots of people were there, including kids from other classes. But after that, everyone just left. We didn’t know where she went.”

"I see. All right, then, you'd better get some rest. Don't be late for school tomorrow."

"Okay. Please let us know if you find her. I'm really worried too."

Lang Qiao stopped the recording of the call. "That girl wasn't being monitored by a guardian, and the other girls had given roughly similar accounts, so the teacher didn't probe further. But what do you make of that conversation? I still find this theory hard to believe, but if the suspect really is a child, that would explain why Qu Tong was willing to get in a stranger's car despite being terrified, and why Deputy Tao and I couldn't find anything useful in the security footage. Still…what a chilling thought."

Luo Wenzhou pushed Su Luozhan's file toward Lang Qiao. "I'll show you something even more chilling."

In Su Luozhan's emergency contact information was the name Su Xiaolan, labelled *Mother*.

A handful of police cars rushed to Su Luozhan's registered address. It was in a fairly well-to-do residential area, where all was quiet this late at night. Startled awake, the dozing security guard stared at Luo Wenzhou's badge, looking dazed.

"Do you have residents surnamed Su?" Luo Wenzhou asked. "A mother and daughter?"

The security guard stared so hard that he almost went cross-eyed. "I'm n-not…I'm not sure. I-I-I'm new here…"

"Get the list of registered property owners from the management office," Luo Wenzhou quickly ordered his officers. "Be careful, though. If this girl really is the suspect we're looking for, then we're in a highly delicate situation. She'll be less stable than an adult, and we don't want to spook her. We should try to keep things from getting out of control if the victim's still alive."

"Unit 401 is the Su family's, Sergeant Luo!" someone reported.

"Everyone clear? Let's go."

The police hid at the ends of the fourth-floor corridor. With his chin, Luo Wenzhou gestured for Lang Qiao to knock.

Trying to massage her facial muscles so that she'd look less like a Botox victim, Lang Qiao put on the friendliest expression she had ever mustered in her life, marched over to the door, and rapped on it. "Anyone home?"

No answer.

Lang Qiao's heart had sped up slightly; she was accustomed to being vicious and imposing, but she wasn't quite used to taking on a kindly guise. She tried again, using her softest, gentlest voice. "Is anyone home? I'm the new tenant from upstairs. Sorry, but can you tell me if any water is seeping into your unit? I think we might accidentally have caused a leak."

There was still no answer.

The technician accompanying the team silently handed Lang Qiao a reverse peephole lens. Lang Qiao fixed it to the door's peephole and bent down slightly to peer into the apartment.

No one was at the door. She could see all the way through into the living room, which appeared to contain the only light in the still, dark apartment. Peering closely, Lang Qiao noticed that the source of the faint light was an incense altar, on which two flickering red electric candles and prayer lamps were set up to either side of a black-and-white portrait. The dead woman in the portrait seemed to stare spookily straight into Lang Qiao’s eyes, her expression cold.

A chill ran down Lang Qiao’s spine, and she tipped her head back involuntarily. Luo Wenzhou shot her a questioning look. Lang Qiao shook her head quickly, shivering, and knocked again. “Anyone there? If you can’t come to the door, just give me a shout! I just want to know whether that water’s leaking.”

An awkwardness spread in the silence of the narrow corridor. Abruptly, Luo Wenzhou raised a hand to motion Lang Qiao back. “Open the door.”

Lang Qiao blinked. “Boss…?”

They had no evidence, no witnesses, not even a warrant. Everything hinged on a hunch.

“It’s fine,” Luo Wenzhou said, his voice low. “If anything happens, I’ll take responsibility. Open it.”

Crowding the door, the criminal investigation team and technicians quickly broke in. An indescribable odor surged forward to meet them—a peculiar mixture of incense, candle wax, midsummer humidity, and mustiness from poor ventilation, all of which seemed to have fermented into a stench two steps from rotting. The apartment itself was empty, though. No one was there.

It wasn’t a large unit, maybe just six hundred square feet—a standard single-bedroom apartment size. But with Su Xiaolan’s funeral portrait standing guard alone, the place felt strangely vacant.

The portrait faced a double bed in the living room, its silken bedspread dull and faded. A bottle of dark nail varnish and a half-empty pack of cigarettes sat near the bed. The adjacent bedroom was smaller and clearly belonged to a young girl. Across the single bed, a row of cheap, expressionless dolls was lined up, sitting shoulder to shoulder facing the door. Each wore a floral dress.

“Oh my god.” Lang Qiao opened the closet of the girl’s room to find the exact same thing: It was full of floral dresses. Even more eerily, each doll’s dress had a matching counterpart in the closet. Goosebumps rose on Lang Qiao’s arms. “How could anyone actually live here?”

Luo Wenzhou pulled on his gloves and rifled through the closet, discovering a small box under the clothes heap. He found the latch and popped the lid, and “Für Elise” began to play from under it. The music box’s batteries must’ve been running low, though; the piano music was a little out of tune, and it sounded sluggish and rather creepy.

Then the officers saw what was *in* the box, and Lang Qiao threw a hand over her mouth.

There was a naked doll inside. An arm and a leg had been detached from it and thrown haphazardly over a mass of bloody fabric strips—cotton fabric covered in vivid white flowers.

“That’s Qu Tong’s dress. Her parents showed us a photo of her wearing it. I remember how badly it was made—one side was poorly stitched and hid part of the pattern, so it looked uneven.” Trembling, Lang Qiao pointed at the stitching on one of the cloth strips. “Just…just like that.”

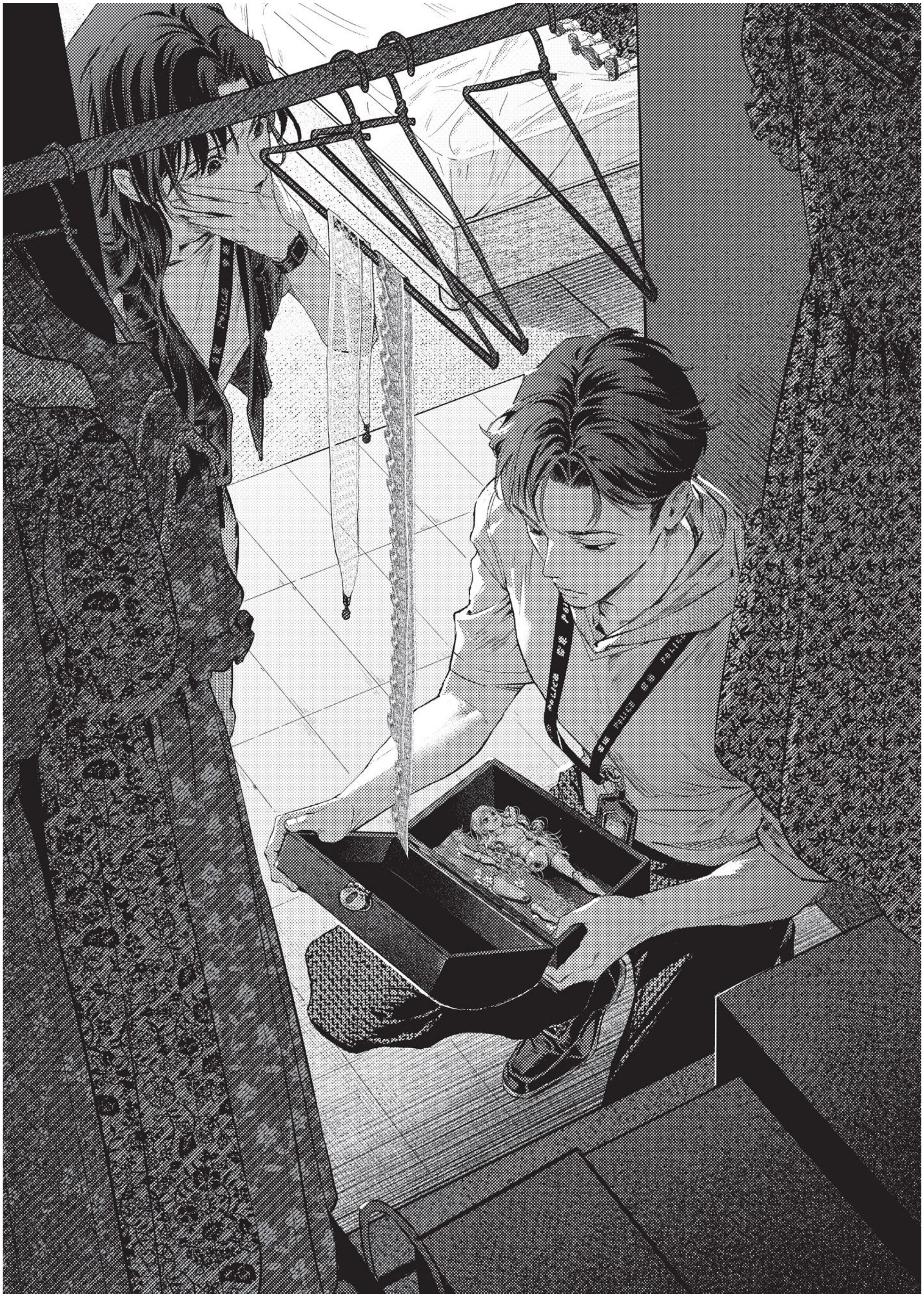
Luo Wenzhou closed the box, his face dark as night. “Bring it back for testing,” he instructed, then turned to check the bathroom.

The bathroom was damp, with thick circles of mold spreading freely over the walls. There were two toothbrushes in front of the chipped mirror in the carved frame, plus a row of lipsticks in different shades and several used cotton buds.

“What’d she tell the teacher again? ‘Dad’s not back yet, and Mom’s sick, so she’s sleeping’?” Luo Wenzhou looked around, then muttered, “There’s no sign that a man ever lived here. Who did she mean by ‘Dad’? Are you sure the call was traceable to here?”

“Sergeant Luo, we’ve found the phone she took the call on earlier.” One officer carefully fished a heavily scratched old cell phone out from under the coffee table and checked its log. “The teacher’s number is logged!”

That meant Su Luozhan had been here earlier! Luo Wenzhou whipped around. “But where is she now?”



Su Luozhan was just a child. She didn’t know how many security cameras the youth center had. She’d probably never thought she might be caught on tape, even in the field. When the teacher called her in the middle of the night, would she have panicked and realized the jig was up?

What would she have done?

Most importantly, where was Zhang Yuchen?

Qu Tong had gone missing in the wilderness on the outskirts of town, but whoever took her wore size seven or eight shoes and could drive, so it definitely wasn’t a little girl. That suggested that the mysterious “Dad” Su Luozhan had referred to was an accomplice. Zhang Yuchen obviously wasn’t in this little apartment with its funereal altar…so was she with that accomplice? If so, had Su Luozhan run to find him as soon as the phone call alerted her to danger?

If Chenchen was still alive, would they risk killing her now to get rid of her?

Would she survive till dawn?

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IN THE MIDSUMMER NIGHT, as thick and syrupy as molten caramel, a girl sprinted down the quiet street. The slapping sound of her shoes against the road followed her like a demon hot on her heels. She seemed spooked even by the occasional noises of stray cats and dogs.

The girl dashed into a neighborhood of old low-rise buildings. Erected some twenty years ago, these buildings stood in rows, just two or three stories tall, each furnished with a yard about big enough for a grapevine trellis. Though the structures looked a bit like villas, the interiors were exceedingly narrow and unpleasant to live in. Each courtyard was shared between several buildings, which was inconvenient when there were a number of residents. In the summer, things were even worse than usual; every possible problem arose, from bad drafts to leaks in the rain. Rumor had it that the whole neighborhood was slated to be demolished.

The girl fumbled twice before finally sticking a key into the lock. She charged inside and grabbed the phone behind the door, then swiftly dialed a number. The phone rang and rang, and the sound of each ring struck her right in the chest. Without realizing she was doing it, she reached out and scratched the mottled wall restlessly with her long nails.

After the dozenth ring, the call dropped.

The girl’s eyes widened in apparent disbelief that the person on the other end had dared to ignore her. She didn’t give up, though. She dialed the number again—to no avail.

The girl was very pretty, with almond eyes, smooth round cheeks, and a pointed little chin—much more doll-like than those cheap plastic toys the police had found. Her innocence and charm blended seamlessly. Now, however, a bitter, terrifying fury overtook her little face. She slammed the telephone against the wall and screamed.

Then a muffled cry echoed through the residence, like the sob of a small animal. The enraged girl whirled around and flipped the light switch expressionlessly.

The person tied up in the corner flinched as the wall light came on, staring incredulously through her tears. It was the missing girl, Chenchen.

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CHENCHEN'S FAMILY WAS still waiting anxiously at the entrance of the youth center. Tao Ran walked out to pick up a call, then avoided the family as he came back to mutter something in Fei Du's ear.

"An adult male accomplice? You mean they used the girl to lure Chenchen to the park, and then the man came, attacked her, and kidnapped her?" Fei Du was frowning.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing, but…something's been bugging me for a while." Fei Du lifted his unfortunate arm in a stretch, pacing in a circle. "It's so strange," he muttered. "Mr. Zhang called his daughter at just past five, and her phone was off. That means the kidnapping was already in progress. An hour later, he tried to use a remote app to turn Chenchen's phone on, but it didn't work. That means she was already under the perpetrator's control, but they were still busy cleaning up after themselves. Later—sometime after six—the other girl left Chenchen's phone behind on purpose. How come?

"One sticking point is that it shouldn't have taken an adult man a whole hour to subdue someone like Chenchen, even if he's not particularly fit." Fei Du's steps paused. "A second is that, after everything else happened, the girl put the battery back into Chenchen's cell phone and deliberately left it behind for someone else to pick up. Why would she do that?"

Dismantling the phone and throwing it away piece by piece would have been simple and secure with the battery removed. At that point, not even police dogs could've traced it. She couldn't have done it to distract the police, either; even a child would know from watching TV that police officers didn't act alone. They wouldn't lose sight of everything else just because of the phone. Besides, what if whoever picked up or stole the phone happened to see Su Luozhan? Wouldn't that have been a greater risk?

"Is it possible that the kidnapping in Xiling was done jointly, but this kidnapping was—for whatever reason—carried out by the girl alone, without the man?" Fei Du mused. "Maybe that's why she needed more time."

Tao Ran stared at him, shocked. He grabbed Fei Du's shoulder. "The girl wouldn't be physically strong enough to go through the whole process of committing a sadistic murder…*and* making a recording…not all by herself. But she knew that Chenchen had a tracking app on her phone, and that Chenchen's parents would use it. She was still trying to torture the parents—trying to achieve the same impact as a recording, but in a different way!"

She'd give them hope, let them search frantically for their daughter, then lead them to despair. But with Chenchen, something unexpected happened. Things took longer than she anticipated.

"She couldn't have dragged off another child her own size all by herself. She must've tricked Chenchen." Fei Du gazed at Chenchen's wailing mother from afar. "But why would Chenchen go with her when she knew her father was looking for her?"

Tao Ran took a deep breath. "'I didn't bring my phone with me today,'" he muttered as if quoting the girl, "'so I can't lend it to you. But my place is near the youth center. Maybe your dad's already there looking for you. When two people are both looking, it's easy for them to miss each other. You could come over to my place and call him.' But her home would have to be very close by, much closer than the youth center—a distance that a child would think was convenient and safe." He grabbed the map. "Within half a mile… No, within five hundred yards…"

Within five hundred yards was an old residential area due for demolition. It was only one street from the other entrance to the park.

"Wait a minute," said Tao Ran. "Why does this address sound familiar?"

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HOPING TO FIND A TRACE of this mysterious adult male, Luo Wenzhou's team ransacked Su Luozhan's residence for anything that might have belonged to a man.

Lang Qiao opened a drawer and dumped out the contents. She found that it contained official documents: ID cards, a household register, several school admissions letters, and the like. Digging out a medical file, she gave it a quick once-over, then dumped it, letting the pages fall to the floor. Luo Wenzhou's gaze swept over it, then stopped—something seemed to have occurred to him suddenly.

He crouched down and picked up two property deeds. One was for this very one-bedroom apartment. The other was for a factory's employee dormitory building, which was older than Su Xiaolan herself; apparently, it had been privately purchased following renovations.

"Xiao-Qiao-er, can you check something for me?" asked Luo Wenzhou. "Twenty years ago, when Su Xiaolan was a child, was she registered as a resident at this address?"

Lang Qiao didn't know why he was asking, but she automatically looked into it. Before she'd found the answer, though, Luo Wenzhou received a call from the officer he'd assigned to watch Xu Wenchao. "Sergeant Luo, we bugged Xu Wenchao's room. Two calls came in, and he didn't pick them up, even though we're sure he heard them. Do you think he knows he's being watched? Oh—we have the caller's number too. It's for a landline. The address is—"

"Number Three, Youth Street Trading Co. Road."

The officer was taken aback. "How did you know that, Sergeant Luo?"

Just then, Lang Qiao ran over to him. "Boss, Su Xiaolan was registered at Number Three, Youth Street Trading Co. Road. This is the mailing address that was on her file when she gave her victim's statement back then!"

"Let's go!" Luo Wenzhou ordered.

Chapter 13

THE COLD, HARD FLOOR woke Chenchen up. At first, she didn't know what was going on; she only remembered that she'd been going home with an older girl from the photography class. The girl's home had been so close to the youth center—just around the corner from the park. It was kind of bare-looking, but it was at least clean.

The phone connection hadn't been good—something about the wires—but the other girl had told her confidently that all they had to do was unplug it and plug it back in. She'd even brought Chenchen a cold drink. Chenchen drank the mango juice through her straw, feeling like she was causing this older girl too much trouble. Then, just as she was wondering whether to suggest they just go back to the center, she began to feel like her soul was being sucked out of her body. She lost control of her limbs and swayed a few times, then completely lost consciousness.

Now, Chenchen's braid felt loose. She was covered in dirt, and her limbs were tied together. It felt like someone had roughly dragged her across the floor; her skin had been scraped raw in a bunch of places, and the sores burned painfully. The tape over her mouth had an unpleasant rubbery taste. She struggled to curl up, inching backward as far as possible.

Only a few steps away, Su Luozhan was staring down at her!

Su Luozhan tilted her head. One long, thin finger twirled a lock of hair falling from her temple. Her icy eyes could have belonged to a dangerous, cold-blooded animal.

She pursed her lips and then smiled at Chenchen. “You’re so annoying.”

Chenchen shuddered violently.

“I hate stupid little girls like you who just follow people around,” Su Luozhan continued. “You’re all scheming bitches. At this age, you have adults to take you everywhere and you get everything you want, just because you know how to act cute. You think of yourself as a kid, as if the entire world revolves around you.” As Su Luozhan spoke, she bent over and took a machete with a curved blade out of the shoe cabinet. The large metal object was a little too heavy for her skinny hand, and it made a scraping noise as she dragged it against the old wooden cabinet.

Chenchen started to struggle frantically against her bonds. With her mouth sealed, she could only make tiny, weak noises, like those of a small animal. Her face went red from exertion, and she did everything she could to wriggle free of the ropes.

Su Luozhan suddenly snapped. “If he won’t come, I can do it myself!”

She raised the blade and rushed at Chenchen.

A terrified human probably had unlimited potential. Chenchen didn’t know where she found the strength at that moment, but despite being tied up, she got her feet on the ground. The blade was in front of her before she could fully stand up, though, so Chenchen threw herself forward, her eyes screwed shut. She managed to escape from just under Su Luozhan’s blade—but in the process, she knocked into the coffee table headfirst.

Blood trickled down her forehead. Her head spun from the impact, putting her off-balance. All she wanted to do was cry, but she knew that wouldn't help. She rested her shoulder on the coffee table for leverage and tried to stand up again.

Su Luozhan had swung too forcefully, and her machete was now stuck in a wooden cupboard in the corner. Even with a mighty pull, she wasn't able to pull out the rather heavy blade. Enraged, Su Luozhan rushed Chenchen and grabbed her hair from behind, pulling. That forced Chenchen to bend backward, feeling like her scalp was about to be torn off. The tears constantly streaming down her face made the edges of the tape over her mouth peel up.

She was like a little lamb awaiting slaughter. But that only made the other party more eager to hurt her, and Su Luozhan slapped her across the face. This utterly shocked Chenchen, who had never been hit before in her life.

"Bitch!" said Su Luozhan. "You're just a bitch!"

The influence of TV and other media had now made the word "bitch" commonplace in junior high and even upper elementary school. There were always some children who matured slightly earlier and liked to keep such colorful adult words in rotation—even if they still behaved like petulant, ice-pop-eating little kids at home.

Su Luozhan shoved Chenchen into the coffee table. Chenchen's back took most of the impact. From the yellowing photos underneath the crystal tabletop, the dead smiled mysteriously up at the two living girls. At that point, the fierce struggle finally defeated the tear-soaked tape over Chenchen's mouth, and she immediately screamed, "Help me!"

This first attempt was feeble and hoarse, but Chenchen quickly got used to speaking again. Her voice grew louder: "Help me! *Help me!*"

As she cried out, Su Luozhan froze. She had thought that something was missing earlier—this hadn't been exhilarating enough. Now she knew what that was: screaming. Chenchen's cries excited her; she was like a child who'd just received a present. Looking at Chenchen in surprised delight, she lifted a leg and stomped down on Chenchen's exposed fingers, which were splayed on the floor.

Once she was experiencing a certain amount of pain, Chenchen could no longer cry out. She gasped soundlessly, her mouth open wide.

"Scream," Su Luozhan taunted. "How come you stopped?"

Chenchen sobbed so hard that she couldn't breathe. Mustering all the energy she had left, she squeezed out a few words. "Su…jiejie…I r-really like…and admire you… You…"

Su Luozhan's face had been impassive, but when Chenchen said "admire," she hesitated for a moment. The hand reaching out to yank Chenchen's hair again stopped in midair as Su Luozhan stared at the other girl with big, round eyes.

Just then, someone hammered on the door, and a man's gruff voice demanded, "What's with all the noise?! A man's trying to sleep!"

Both girls shivered in unison.

"Open up, or I'm calling the cops!" the man continued angrily. "Watching horror films in the middle of the night, huh? You think you're the only one who lives here, screaming like that?"

Su Luozhan clamped a hand over Chenchen's mouth. She grabbed a few napkins from a box, rolled them up, and stuffed them between Chenchen's teeth, then took a deep breath. "Sorry, Uncle." She'd assumed a soft voice, her face impassive. “My parents aren’t home, so I can’t open the door for a stranger. I’ll turn the volume down.”

The man paused for a moment, then retorted sternly, “What the heck? A kid?! Come out here. I’ll help your parents teach you a lesson!” Su Luozhan’s brow furrowed, but before she could say anything, the man at the door started rambling madly. “You have to have basic respect as a human, you know! Do you know what respect is? Not causing others trouble. What school do you go to? I’ll for sure call your teachers. What exactly are they teaching you, you brat?!”

There was no sign of the man falling silent, and a cold shadow spread over Su Luozhan’s pretty little face. “I’m sorry, Uncle. I apologize, okay?”

“What are you saying? I can’t hear you! Where’s all that energy you had a minute ago?”

Su Luozhan just wanted to get rid of this weirdo who’d turned up all of a sudden. She stuffed the napkins in Chenchen’s mouth a little more securely, stood, and walked toward the door. One step, two steps…

Just before she reached the door, she stopped abruptly. Although *that* man always cleaned and paid the fees on time, everyone knew that no one lived here. The building had stood empty for ages. Why wasn’t this man alarmed to learn—in the middle of the night, no less—that a child was living here without her parents?

Putting two and two together, Su Luozhan turned tail and ran. In the same moment, the old wooden door was forced open violently from outside, and multiple police officers barged in. Su Luozhan grabbed the machete that was stuck in the cabinet. Before, she hadn’t been able to get the blade out no matter what she did—but under this pressure, she now somehow pulled it free. The police were about to reach her, though.

Su Luozhan lifted the machete and pressed it against the back of Chenchen's neck. Blood immediately welled up and began to drip. "Don't come any closer!" she screamed.

The front door quivered against the wall, having been roughly knocked open, yet the air in the room seemed to freeze.

Suddenly, Su Luozhan knelt, hiding behind Chenchen. Her heavy machete seemed about to come down at any moment. The blade traveled around Chenchen's neck once and finally stopped on one side. Su Luozhan's hands trembled, but her gaze, when she stared up at the officers, looked like that of a small beast fighting to the death—ferocious and furious.

Tao Ran stopped anyone from getting closer. He stood a few careful steps away. "Su…Su Luozhan, right?"

Su Luozhan didn't respond.

Thoughts flew through Tao Ran's head. He didn't know how to negotiate with someone this young. That was when Fei Du appeared at the door, arriving a little later than everyone else. He turned slightly to the side, hiding his injured arm. Then he swept a casual look around the room. "Where's the person we're taking in?"

Su Luozhan froze again. She couldn't help but look at him.

"Oh. There's a kid," Fei Du said, as if he'd only just noticed her. His tone brusque, he asked her, "Where's the kidnapping murderer who was with you?"

Su Luozhan looked at the machete in her hand and the girl under its blade, then back up at Fei Du, as though she didn't know how to respond.

"Put the knife down. It's okay. No need to be so nervous." Fei Du looked around the old unit. He could see that the previous owner had long since moved out, but they'd left behind signs of a chaotic life: walls stained yellow from smoke and oil, and a pile of empty liquor bottles in the corner. Fei Du snorted judgmentally. "What a thing to do—use a stupid child as bait, then hide. I've never encountered such an incompetent criminal before. Don't worry, little girl—this place is completely surrounded by police. He won't get away. These nice police officers and their Law on the Protection of Minors will keep you safe… I can't believe you can even lift such a large knife. Isn't it heavy?"

Now that he'd mentioned it, Su Luozhan immediately felt as though her wrist was going numb, as though it could no longer hold the blade's weight. Simultaneously, she pieced together what Fei Du was saying—the police thought the man had done this, and that she was just an innocent piece of bait!

She'd fooled them, she realized smugly. Staring pathetically at Fei Du, she forced tears to well in her eyes, which reddened the rims and made Su Luozhan look even more pitiful than Chenchen.

Tao Ran immediately caught on and stepped forward. When he saw Su Luozhan shrink back and grip the machete tighter in alarm, he crouched down and spread his hands. With his gaze at her level, he tried to focus entirely on her and ignore Chenchen. "Is it true? Someone forced you?"

Su Luozhan hesitated for a few seconds, then nodded decisively.

Tao Ran's voice grew even gentler, and he slowly extended an open hand to her, inch by inch. "Then can you give me the knife and take us to find the bad guy?"

Su Luozhan stared at his hand, suddenly unsure. When it came too close, her own hands nervously lifted the machete a little. The trembling blade nicked Chenchen's neck in no time—but this time, Suo Luozhan hadn't done so deliberately. She really couldn't hold it up anymore.

Tao Ran's hand paused naturally in midair. "Is the bad guy named Xu Wenchao? Did he use you to kidnap Qu Tong? Did he do anything bad to you?"

Fei Du snorted. "To get together with him, did your mother dress you up like a doll and put makeup on you?"

Su Luozhan gasped extremely quietly, as though controlling her emotions took all her strength.

"She was getting old, and she couldn't keep up her youthful good looks, so she put her child on the line. She wouldn't let you wear anything else or cut your hair, right?" Fei Du stared at her. "Did she abuse you? Did she ever hit you?"

As he spoke, Su Luozhan's tears spilled over and blurred her vision. It was unclear whether they were real or fake. Suddenly, she felt something tighten over her wrist—Tao Ran had taken the opportunity to grab the hand she was holding the machete with. Su Luozhan struggled instinctively against his grip, but Tao Ran said quietly, "Don't be afraid. It's okay—it's okay. I know you're a good kid. Someone forced you to do this. Don't worry…"

His voice was so gentle, but he had a vise grip on her. Su Luozhan had no way to resist. After struggling for a while, she gave up and let Tao Ran take her knife.

An officer approached and scooped up Chenchen, removing her from Su Luozhan's control.

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LUO WENZHOU HAD just arrived when a colleague said in his earpiece, "Sergeant Luo, the suspect's been captured, and she's identified Xu Wenchao as her accomplice. Can we apply for an arrest warrant now?"

"Yes. Notify the boys keeping watch over Xu Wenchao. Don't let him get away." Luo Wenzhou helped carry Chenchen into the ambulance, then turned toward Su Luozhan, who was in police custody. "Do you know where Qu Tong is?" he asked.

Su Luozhan's only response was to shake her head at him. A corner of her small, delicate mouth twitched briefly upward, as if she'd remembered something; then, as though she herself realized what she'd done, she made a show of lowering her head very meekly.

Luo Wenzhou had mentally prepared himself when he saw the music box, but looking at this girl still gave rise to an uncomfortable feeling in his chest. His gaze swept over her wavy hair and thick eyelashes, and he felt a sudden hint of absurd, unnamable sadness.

He waved his hand, signaling his colleagues to take Su Luozhan into the police car. When he turned back to the ambulance, a few first responders were taking care of the injury on Chenchen’s forehead and quietly asking her questions.

Chenchen’s family had arrived as soon as they could, and her mother’s legs went numb with the sudden, breathless feeling of finding something she’d lost; she nearly fell to her knees. Her husband steadied her, and their brief outbreak of finger-pointing and placing blame immediately melted away. Holding each other, they walked toward their daughter.

Nearly eight hours after she disappeared, the police finally found Zhang Yuchen in one piece, with only superficial injuries—although she’d suffered a horrific fright. This was a miracle.

After a night of work, they’d at least found one.

Heaving a sigh, Luo Wenzhou raised a hand out of habit…but his partner, who usually returned his high fives, left him hanging. Turning around awkwardly, Luo Wenzhou realized that Tao Ran was standing next to Chang Ning, who was crying. Saying something to her in a low, comforting voice, Tao Ran handed her a handkerchief.

Faced with this beautiful woman, Deputy Tao had completely forgotten his partner. Luo Wenzhou couldn’t believe it. What had happened to “bros before hoes”?!

While Luo Wenzhou was gaping at Tao Ran, someone else high-fived his still-outstretched hand. Luo Wenzhou looked toward them in surprise, only to see that the injured CEO Fei Du, his arm still in a sling, had strolled to his side. For some reason, Fei Du had stooped to performing such a frivolous act.

Fei Du slowly put his hand back in his pocket, then looked at Luo Wenzhou with something that could’ve been a smile. “Tch. How childish,

Sergeant Luo.”

Not knowing what to say, Luo Wenzhou watched this non-employee duck into his car. Fei Du crossed his legs, waiting for the driver to come start the car for him. Going by his years of experience flirting and reading between the lines, Luo Wenzhou could have sworn that Fei Du’s voice and expression had had an inappropriately teasing undertone.

Give some people an inch, and they’ll take a mile, Luo Wenzhou thought disbelievingly. *No—a light-year!*

Chapter 14

"LET'S WORK A LITTLE HARDER TODAY, comrades. I've already reimbursed you all for late-night snacks and paid for the girls' face masks. If you've got a wife and kids, I'll write you an apology letter later. We're pulling an all-nighter tonight. Even if we're forced to dig up the entire Su apartment, we need to get to the bottom of this. I want to find that Qu Tong girl no matter what, dead or alive." When Luo Wenzhou finished speaking into the walkie-talkie, he turned to Fei Du, who was looking at him with interest. "You might actually be cursed, young man. This sure was a *happy* birthday for you. Well, I can't drive you back. Would you rather I call you a taxi or drop you off at a hotel somewhere along the way?"

Fei Du didn't answer. Instead, he asked randomly, "What do you guys eat at night when you do overtime?"

"Usually a gutter-oil deluxe meal." Luo Wenzhou's expression was a little bitter. "Occasionally, thanks to certain picky people, we eat something a little more high-end, like McDonald's—*if* we just got paid."

Fei Du's silence spoke volumes.

Luo Wenzhou drove toward the municipal bureau. "If my team was as hard to accommodate as you," he said grumpily, "I wouldn't be able to expense all their spending. At any rate, there's a hotel up ahead—and it charges half my monthly pay for a single night. Should I drop you off?"

"No. The scent in their lobby is way too overpowering, and their bathrooms don't have bathtubs," Fei Du drawled to the poor government worker who ate fried chicken when hungry and drank gutter oil when thirsty. Ignoring the loathing his wealth had incited in Luo Wenzhou, he directed, “Keep driving. There’s a *six*-star place by your office, and their service is good enough. I’ll get out at the bureau and walk over.”

Luo Wenzhou tried, but eventually, he couldn’t hold it in. “Fei-zong, all you do is have fun and fuck around. You never do actual work. Does your family have enough money to squander it like this for the rest of your life? What’ll you do after you waste the family fortune? You won’t have a pot to piss in. You’re not getting any younger, you know. After today—uh, yesterday—you’re even old enough to go to a civil affairs bureau and register for marriage. Can you please have a little more direction in your life?!”

Fei Du rested his uninjured elbow on the car door. He didn’t say anything, only smiled, chin in hand. Luo Wenzhou didn’t know what was so funny. Fei Du worried him. If it weren’t for the fact that the younger man was injured, Luo Wenzhou would’ve kicked him out of the car.

“You sure you don’t need my help anymore?” Fei Du asked after a while.

“Are you an employee? Do you get paid?” As he scolded Fei Du, Luo Wenzhou turned onto a side road, heading for Fei Du’s chosen hotel. “It’s none of your business.”

“I heard that the little girl identified the so-called ‘accomplice’ you guys are arresting. And you have no other proof, right?”

“The investigation process is top secret,” Luo Wenzhou said expressionlessly.

Fei Du dismissed that. “Oh, *right*. And because this ‘accomplice’ has a slight connection to the serial kidnapping case twenty years ago, he comes off as suspicious to you guys—which means you have no proof. That little girl isn't even thirteen yet. She looks very smart, but she doesn't seem all that mentally stable. How convincing will her testimony be? The man you're after has an alibi the police can corroborate. What if he refuses to admit to the crime?"

Luo Wenzhou ground his teeth.

"And that little girl," Fei Du continued, spreading his hands. "You won't get anything out of her. You guys aren't allowed to force anything out of a kid. Are the police planning to get a juvenile criminal psychologist here overnight?"

Everything Fei Du said was true, which was exactly what was causing Luo Wenzhou such a headache. They lacked concrete supporting evidence to justify everything that happened that night. If they hadn't managed to save Chenchen, Luo Wenzhou would have had a lot to answer for the next day solely because he'd neglected proper procedure.

The car arrived at the hotel, where the chilly air conditioning flowed toward them, carrying a cool, calm scent. It was very relaxing. Despite the early hour, a bellboy approached them to welcome the guests enthusiastically.

Having delivered his commentary on the police force's rescue mission, Fei Du got out of the car, but he suddenly remembered something and turned around. He knocked on Luo Wenzhou's window, then opened the driver's side door. "I forgot my phone. Could you please pass it to me?"

Luo Wenzhou made a noise of acquiescence and picked up the phone from the passenger seat. He was just about to hand it over when Fei Du reached into the car, apparently unable to wait any longer.

Fei Du's shirt hung loosely off him, a little disheveled by the crash. From Luo Wenzhou's angle, he could see down the low-hanging collar. Although Fei Du's chest was on the thin side, the well-defined collarbones above it suggested that he had power hidden within. He hadn't gone for cologne today, but the man's decadent flesh had probably been drenched in so many famous perfumes from all over the world that it gave him his own scent. A subtle, indistinct male fragrance seemed to emanate from his collar, so vague that it vanished without a trace before you could get a good whiff.

As Fei Du reached into the vehicle, he seemed ready to press his arm against Luo Wenzhou, yet he retreated after the merest touch; as he took his phone, his finger brushed Luo Wenzhou's hand, seemingly by accident.

Luo Wenzhou stilled. When a man like him—young, virile, without a fixed partner for the moment, interested in men, and incredibly stressed from work—was caught off guard by such deliberate temptation, the effects were as bad as if you'd showed a Michelin-starred restaurant's late-night Weibo post to someone on day three of a fast.

"I should still be here in the morning. If you need anything, you can come find me." Fei Du straightened up and stuck the damn phone in his pocket. "I could talk to that girl for you. I'm not an expert on troubled youths, but I do have ample experience as a troubled youth myself."

Luo Wenzhou waved a tired hand at him. "Please leave."

When Fei Du was finally gone, Luo Wenzhou parked on the roadside. He'd smoked two cigarettes before he recovered from his half-hard state.

Anytime he thought about Fei Du, he couldn't help sighing at the changes in their relationship. Most people could rely on blind dates and matchmaking to address personal needs, busy hours of work or study notwithstanding. Things were much less convenient for minority orientations like Luo Wenzhou's.

As a fresh graduate, "Young Master Luo" had had his years of fun, just like Fei Du. Later, he'd realized that—while sleeping around was easy—finding someone who actually suited him was a challenge. The "fun" lifestyle really only had four stages: infatuation, acclimatization, boredom, and disgust. On top of that, Luo Wenzhou's career had put more and more pressure on him, distracting him from his love life. Thus, he'd gradually settled into "golden years" of living just to work and pet his cat.

But being mentally old and physically young set his emotional and physiological desires at odds. *If this continues,* Luo Wenzhou thought wildly, *God knows when I'll start getting hard at the sight of Luo Yiguo's fluffy tail.*

He stomped the pedal irascibly. With a roar, the car sped back to the brightly lit municipal bureau.

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"SERGEANT LUO, Xu Wenchao has been detained. He's in the interrogation room. Su Luozhan's in a different room with Xiao-Lang watching over her. Are you planning…"

Before the officer finished speaking, Luo Wenzhou's hurried footsteps came to a sudden stop. A hunched man stood in the hallway. "Guo-shu?"

Guo Heng put out his cigarette and stood up slowly, doing his best to straighten his back…without much success.

Luo Wenzhou began, “Why are you—”

“Since you came to find me this afternoon, are you reopening the case?” Guo Heng stared at him, his eyes burning. “You are, right? My daughter… We’ve never found her, after all these years. But I heard that you guys found one of the girls you were looking for, and that she’s still alive. Is it true? Are you trying to capture the suspect now? Is there hope that we might find out the truth about Feifei’s kidnapping? Did Wu Guangchuan have accomplices?”

The flame that Yang-lao mentioned seemed to reignite in the old man’s murky eyes; it was difficult to meet his gaze. Confronted so suddenly, Luo Wenzhou didn’t know what to say—a vague answer was the best he could do. “Rest assured that we’ll do our best.”

Then he beat a hasty retreat. Even when he was a good distance away, he still felt Guo Heng’s fiery gaze burning holes in his back.

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XU WENCHAO HAD COME to the station twice in one day, and in doing so, had gone from “individual assisting the investigation” to “suspect.” This time, he’d been arrested at home in the middle of the night, so he didn’t look great; he was haggard from lack of sleep, and there was even visible stubble at the corners of his mouth. He also wasn’t nearly as polite now. He sat with his hands clasped in his lap, something in his pale face indescribably unbalanced.

“I didn’t.” Xu Wenchao’s tone was helpless, even innocent, but he spoke sharply. “Let me repeat myself: I’ve never kidnapped any girls, and I’ve never killed any. You’ve seen my dashcam history. You’ve followed me illegally and tapped my home. Now that you guys have violated my basic human rights, have you found any evidence of crime?”

The interrogator was a very young officer named Wu. He loathed perverts who pretended to be upright citizens, like this suspect. “Su Luozhan kidnapped a girl from her school, tortured her, and tried to kill her, although she was unsuccessful,” he said coldly. “She called you twice from the scene of the crime; she also identified you as an accomplice in front of everyone. What do you have to say to that?”

Xu Wenchao leaned back in his chair. “A phone call and a statement from a child, and I’m a murderer,” he remarked in that uniquely mild tone. “Well, now I know that if someone insists on your guilt, the cops will find something to prove it.”

“Why did Su Luozhan call you?” Xiao-Wu pressed. “Why would she want to frame you?”

When Xu Wenchao looked up, Luo Wenzhou saw his eyes clearly through the security camera. A bad feeling came over him. This man was too calm, too confident—he wasn’t panicking at all. As if he held a secret trump card.

“Because her mother and I were lovers,” said Xu Wenchao. “Yes. I didn’t tell you when I visited this afternoon…because I was afraid of the trouble it would cause me. I’d liked Su Xiaolan since I was a kid, but she didn’t like me. She preferred that chaotic, dangerous life of hers. It wasn’t until she was at the end of her life that she was willing to show me a little warmth. I was grateful to her for it; I even wanted to marry her. If she had lived, I’d have been Su Luozhan’s stepfather by this point. Now, though, it’s tricky for me to adopt her, because we’re not connected at all legally. It’s going to take time to figure something out. I’ve been doing my best to provide for her in the meantime. She calls me whenever she needs something. That’s normal.”

“But when she called you today, you didn’t pick up.”

“Because I realized my phone had already been tapped,” Xu Wenchao said frankly. “Even if it wasn’t her who’d called—if it was someone delivering takeout or a real-estate telemarketer—I wouldn’t have picked up either. Officer, haven’t I got the right to maintain some freedom under the crushing weight of state power?”

“So Su Luozhan is framing you?”

“I don’t know why she would implicate me. If she really did, I’d be very sad. Her mother always kind of neglected her. I’d say I’m the more responsible parental figure. Su Xiaolan always let the kid roam free, so she does some things that cross the line. I’ve tried to teach her better, though. Maybe she felt like she had to rebel against me because of that.” Xu Wenchao paused briefly. “Or maybe she doesn’t know what she’s saying, and someone’s influencing her.”

Xiao-Wu slapped the table. “Don’t give me that shit! The survivor said that Su Luozhan called you, then said, ‘If he won’t come, I can do it myself!’ And *you* hired a cleaner to go to that place regularly. The bills are paid from your account! Why maintain an old apartment in a building that’s about to be torn down? You're clearly hiding something! If we hadn't been watching you, that kidnapped girl might not have lived to see the morning!"

Xu Wenchao snorted. "How do you make the leap from maintaining an old apartment to kidnapping and murdering someone? Using that logic, all this city's crime should be pinned on the municipal government."

"Didn't he say that he suffered brain damage from his childhood fever?" Luo Wenzhou asked his coworker, raising a surprised brow. "He seems pretty clever now. Can stupidity be intermittent?"

"If he keeps denying it, Sergeant, we'll have no other evidence. Should we hook him up to a lie detector?"

"Not yet. Go look into his accounts, his credit cards, his properties and cars… Take his photo and go talk to all the major car rental companies. And check with his personal connections. The car he was driving when he kidnapped Qu Tong probably wasn't his, because there was nothing suspicious about the dashcam footage from the day she disappeared. That means he wasn't driving the car that's registered as his, and I doubt he could just hide an extra big metal box with four wheels."

The officer in the interrogation room kept at it. "Let me ask you again: Where were you on the night of the twenty-seventh?"

"At home, reading." Xu Wenchao's expression didn't change. "I'm a freelancer. I don't need to work every day. It's normal for me to read at home."

"If you were reading at home, why did you rent a car?"

That was a bluff. Xu Wenchao may not have been driving his own car that day in Xiling, but if he drove a car he owned under someone else's name or one borrowed from someone else, it would be traceable. The police could look into it easily. A much better choice would have been to rent a vehicle from a black-market rental car company. Some such companies were outright illegal and remained well under the radar. That was perhaps the most likely route for Xu Wenchao to have taken.

Luo Wenzhou closed his mouth and crossed his arms in front of him. He concentrated, waiting for Xu Wenchao's explanation. But Xu Wenchao raised a brow, looking genuinely surprised. "What are you talking about, Officer?"

"On the night of the twenty-seventh, you followed a school bus leaving Xiling and waited for an opportunity to kidnap one of the eleven female students aboard. Along the way, you happened to witness the bus getting hijacked. A girl named Qu Tong managed to escape from the bus while this was happening, and she ran into you and Su Luozhan. She trusted you, asked you for help, and got in your car. But she'd actually run right into your trap!"

Xu Wenchao laughed in disbelief, shaking his head. "This is—"

"The security cameras outside the museum caught your car license plate!" Xiao-Wu interrupted sternly. "What else do we have to say?!"

"Officer," Xu Wenchao asked calmly, "what time on the twenty-seventh?"

"You don't know?" Xiao-Wu asked stonily.

"I really don't." Xu Wenchao raised both hands in a gesture of helpless surrender. "All right—it seems like you guys are so intent on eliciting a confession from me that you won't tell me the exact time. Still, I need to stand up for myself. If this happened before midnight, I probably wouldn't have had time to get over there. You know where I live. It would take me at least three hours to drive to Xiling—and that’s with good weather and no traffic. On the evening of the twenty-seventh, I ordered takeout at around 8:30 p.m. There are records of the order number and the delivery time. If I’m lucky, the delivery man might even remember me.”

Luo Wenzhou’s heart sank. His gut feeling had been right.

“I suggest you go verify what I just said, then declare my innocence.” Xu Wenchao looked down at his watch. “But it does seem like I’ll be spending the night here. When can I contact a lawyer? Oh, right—I still don’t know what exactly Su Luozhan did, but she’s young. Can you guys please go easy on her? If necessary, I’ll take responsibility as her guardian.”

Chapter 15

"XU WENCHAO REALLY WAS HOME at eight thirty on the night of the twenty-seventh."

Tao Ran had gone to the hospital to speak to Chenchen, who was slowly coming around. As he sped back to the bureau, he'd received an update, so he'd made a detour to verify Xu Wenchao's alibi. Now he'd come back to report his findings.

"I even checked his takeout orders from the last six months," he continued. "They follow a pretty regular schedule, and he usually orders from the same few places. The delivery drivers all know him."

"Could he have bribed the delivery driver?" asked Xiao-Wu.

"Look briefly into the driver and Xu Wenchao's interactions, but I think it's unlikely," said Luo Wenzhou. "Delivery drivers are usually younger people. There's a lot of turnover, and drivers tend to switch jobs every two to three months. They might remember customers' faces, but they'd have no reason to lie for a customer in such a serious case. Besides, not everyone *can* lie to the police. Also, there's one more thing."

"What?"

"When Xu Wenchao came in in the afternoon, he was wearing running shoes, and I wasn't able to get a good look. But judging from the dress shoes he's wearing now, I think he's at least one shoe size too small."

The meeting room fell silent. Then Lang Qiao marched in and threw herself onto a chair. "Boss, send someone else in. I'm at my wits' end with that kid. She gives me the creeps."

“How’s Su Luozhan?” Luo Wenzhou asked.

“She’s great. Eats and sleeps normally.” Shaking her head, Lang Qiao accepted a can of coffee from a coworker. “She’s not afraid of adults or police officers. I still don’t know why not. It’s possible she’s just too young to understand the consequences of her actions, or maybe she’s too cunning—she knows she’s young, so she’s not afraid of getting in trouble. If you talk to her nicely, she plays dumb and puts on a cute act; if you try to scare her, she just smiles at you. Oh, right—and she asked for a bottle of sweet milk just now. When she was done drinking it, she said, ‘I’m tired. Can I take a nap?’ And then she really did just fall asleep. Frankly, if I were caught red-handed doing something bad and got hauled to a police station, I’d be scared to death. *Sleep?* Is this kid even human?”

Luo Wenzhou didn’t respond. With a serious look on his face, he lit a cigarette but then spaced out before he even managed to put it in his mouth. Without a doubt, Xu Wenchao had played some role in all this. There was no way it was all a coincidence. He was the link between this case and the one from twenty years ago. On top of that, he had a strong connection to Su Xiaolan and her daughter. Su Luozhan had called him twice from the crime scene, and when the police questioned her, she’d identified him without hesitation.

Xu Wenchao’s change in attitude between his two visits to the station was noteworthy in itself. The first time around, he’d been gentle and polite, but he hadn’t carried himself with such ease. He might show off his ability to lose his memories at any moment, and Tao Ran had even managed to back him into a corner. He’d acted as though this unexpected police summons panicked him a little. This time, in contrast, he was sharp and calm; his words were measured, and there wasn’t a careless one among them. When the police had barged in in the middle of the night to take him to the station, he'd already been neatly dressed.

During Xu Wenchao's first visit, he'd also said that he'd heard about Qu Tong's case on the radio. Of course, they weren't able to publicize many details of the case, but the call for information had included the words "the night of the twenty-seventh" and "Xiling." If he had such a solid alibi, why hadn't he told them then? Had he been completely caught off guard and forgotten in a panic? Or had he not yet realized that the police suspected him? Or…had he been testing the police?

The latter explanation was very disquieting.

Either way, a person couldn't be split in two. Xu Wenchao couldn't have been in two different locations at the same time. That was reality.

Luo Wenzhou thought for a moment, then knocked on the table. "Hey, everyone listen up! I need you guys to help me look into something…"

Someone pushed the meeting room door open from outside, interrupting him. One of the security guards stationed at the bureau entrance poked his head in. "Sergeant Luo, did you guys order takeout? It's here."

Luo Wenzhou paused. Before he could respond, the team of officers who'd been running around for most of the night swarmed over, eyes gleaming. Then they all froze. The middle-of-the-night delivery wasn't barbecue skewers, malatang, or even McDonald's or KFC.

There were two large insulated bags: One was a warming bag, and the other held dry ice. Both sported a luxurious-looking logo, and the utensils were packaged in paper boxes made for that specific purpose. They were all so dainty that they didn't seem disposable. When the team opened the bags, they found Western food, Chinese food, cold dishes, hot dishes… and a few boxes of fresh ice cream in the cooler bag. It was like a luxury hotel had delivered its dinner buffet right to their office!

Luo Wenzhou choked mid-puff on his cigarette.

Lang Qiao recovered first, grabbing a box of ice cream and clutching it. “Holy shit, Boss! This is too much!”

“What are you doing?” Tao Ran asked him, shocked. “How will you get by for the rest of this month?”

“Did you win the lottery, Boss?”

“He must’ve won big betting on the European Championship!”

“What are you talking about? Our sergeant wouldn’t do that kind of thing. Hey, Sergeant Luo, did your parents suddenly give you some spending money?”

“Why would they randomly give him money? That’d be suspicious… Are they planning to have another kid?”

What lovely coworkers. “Another kid, my ass,” Luo Wenzhou said. “Fuck off!”

He turned the insulated bag over, and his eyes landed on a familiar logo—that of the hotel he’d just returned from. It was obvious what filthy-rich buyer had sent the food. The corner of Luo Wenzhou’s eye started to twitch.

“Hey, I think that’s the logo for the fancy hotel north of here,” Lang Qiao said suddenly. “Isn’t their buffet snooty as heck? How come they’re even open this late? And…and they do *delivery*? I can’t believe they’d lower themselves to serve commoners like that.”

“Not even food shuts you up, huh?” Veins bulged at Luo Wenzhou’s temples. “Where are all these questions coming from? If you don’t want to eat, get back to work!”

Lang Qiao studied Luo Wenzhou’s expression, and her long-dead girlish enthusiasm suddenly returned to life. Such a romantic midnight meal really didn’t suit Sergeant Luo’s jianbing-and-hot-soy-milk lifestyle, and Lang Qiao’s mind lit on an entirely new possibility. “Hold on, Boss,” she blurted. “Did someone special deliver a romantic dinner because they want to get in your—ow!”

Luo Wenzhou’s paper ball had smacked her on the forehead.

Playing oblivious, he stubbornly skipped over all questions related to the meal and picked up where he’d left off, now surrounded by the aromas of the food. “You guys eat. I’ll continue. I need to split us into two teams. The first team will look up all lost-child cases from the counties and areas under our jurisdiction, focusing on each child’s age, gender, and appearance at the time when they disappeared, in addition to the case summary. Let’s go through all the cases from the last two years and narrow them down step by step using those criteria.”

“You don’t think Qu Tong was the first one?” Tao Ran asked, a piece of beef rib in his mouth.

“The culprit followed Qu Tong for a long time without leaving any signs, and although the situation changed in a very sudden way, he managed to take her away very calmly. That means he had a clear goal. He was stalking her to kidnap her; it wasn’t a spur-of-the-moment decision. So I think Qu Tong might not have been the first,” Luo Wenzhou said in a low voice. “We’re at a dead end for evidence on the present case, so we’ll look into past cases instead. Anyway, I need you guys in the second group to dig up everything you can on Su Luozhan, Su Xiaolan, and Xu Wenchao. I want report cards, bank accounts, phone records, personal computers—anything you can find."

Time was tight, and these tasks were vital. All the officers began either taking notes or making phone calls. Even their sumptuous midnight feast felt heavy and sorrowful now, and none of them had brainpower to spare for guessing the truth behind the meal.

Luo Wenzhou grabbed a roasted chicken wing with a napkin, gnawing it as quickly and as clean as a plague of locusts devouring a field. "You're going to need all the energy you can get, so eat your fill—but then get moving. Xiao-Lang, come act as coordinator."

"Aren't we going to keep questioning Su Luozhan, Boss?"

"It's useless," Luo Wenzhou sighed. "An adult, you can try to piss off, scare, or mislead. But that Su Luozhan… When you sit in front of her, she doesn't think of you as an equal. Maybe, in her eyes, humans are like lambs—prey or food. Besides, she's too young for her statement to be admissible in court; we'd only be able to use it for reference. We need to close this case properly. The father of a victim twenty years ago is standing outside in the hallway right now. I'm sure none of us want this to drag on until we retire, so let's be quick."

Data organization was boring; it didn't give anyone a rush, and the early morning hours were especially hard to stay awake through. The officers had to rely on subpar coffee to keep their energy up. There was basic information on all the lost-child cases: girl or boy, age, where and how they went missing. But as for what kind of kid the missing child was;

what they liked; their temperament; and whether their families still jolted awake from nightmares, prepared to spend the rest of their lives searching hopelessly—none of that appeared on paper. The tragedies stacked up on top of each other as the officers' tired eyes skimmed case after case. They were like the epitaphs of disaster victims: shocking, yet dull.

Soon, the sky brightened. At this point, the meeting room surfaces were strewn with coffee cans and cigarette butts.

"Last year, there were thirty-two missing girls between nine and fourteen, not counting the ones who left letters saying that they were running away or whose bodies were found later. The year before that, there were thirty-one. Appearance-wise, if we exclude the girls who hit puberty early and looked more like adults, and the ones who had yet to start puberty and looked like they'd just lost their baby teeth, that leaves twenty-six last year and twenty the year before."

Luo Wenzhou poured his tea onto a wet wipe and rubbed his face with it. "What about the kids wearing floral dresses?"

"Seven last year. Eight the year before that." Lang Qiao looked up. All their colleagues were yawning; she was the only one in the room whose bloodshot eyes showed no sign of sleepiness, and her face was deathly pale in the glow of the computer. "Sergeant Luo—everyone—I think you need to look at this."

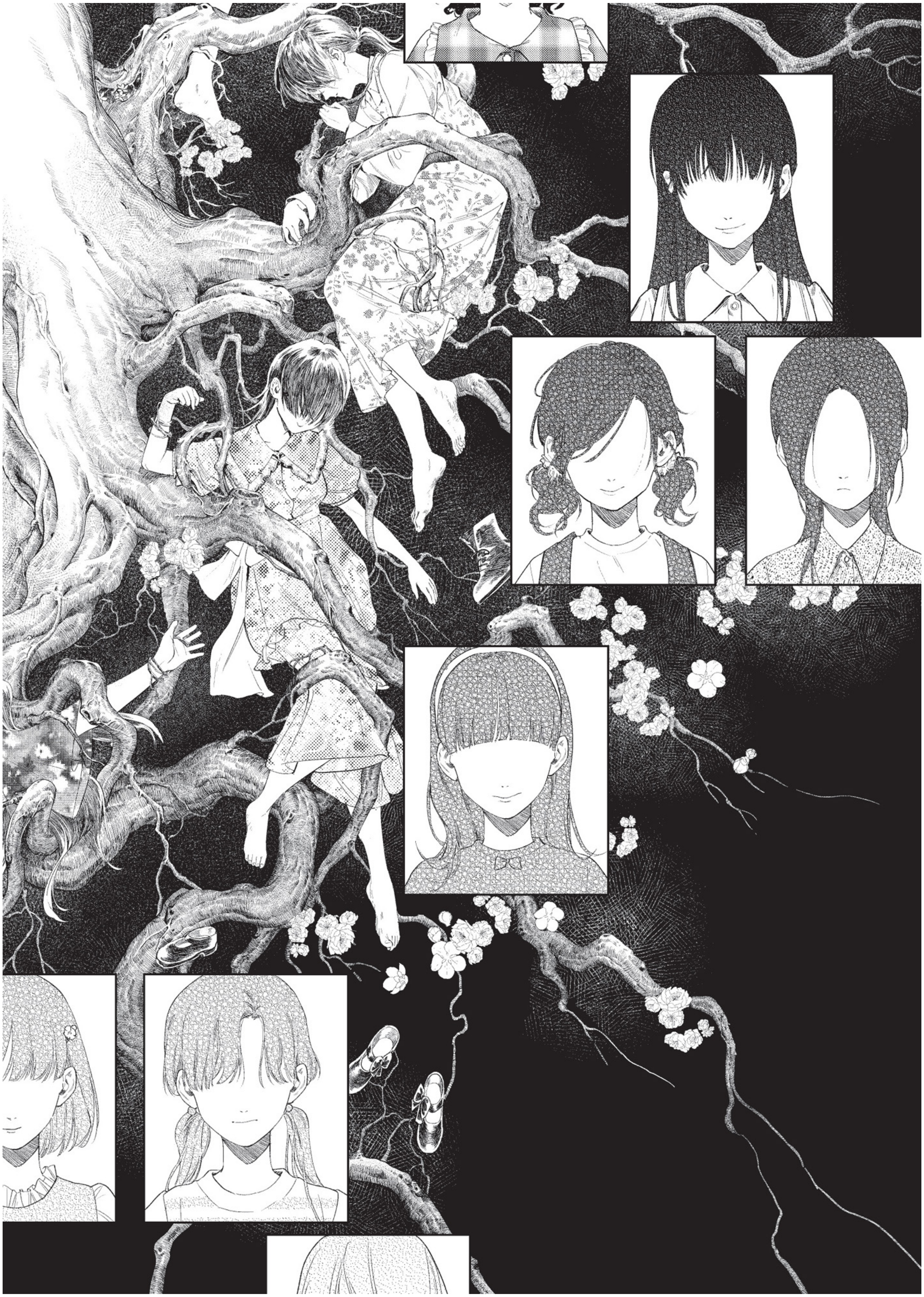
Lang Qiao connected her laptop to the meeting-room projector, and a summary report appeared on the projection screen. Tao Ran's yawn got caught halfway out of his throat.

The fifteen girls all looked distinct from one another individually, but setting their pictures side by side like this somehow diluted their unique characteristics. What stood out was the peculiar stage they were all in: too old to be a “little girl,” too young to be a teenager. They all looked alike; at first glance, it was hard to tell who was who.

Tao Ran murmured, “No way…”

The girls were like a handful of dried flowers spread out on the ground. Drowned in the sea of lost-child cases, they’d slowly become yet more unresolved cases in a pile of old papers, disappearing without a trace. It was just coincidence that anyone had realized the girls were flowers growing on the same vine.

That poisonous vine grew in a deep forest under splendid sunlight, its root system expansive, its branches and vines spread quietly to create an invisible net. Just one small segment of it sent shivers down one’s spine.



“Keep going,” Luo Wenzhou instructed. “Go back a decade… No, two. Keep going until the year of the Lianhuashan case!”

No one was sleepy anymore. The meeting room that had become their makeshift office was suddenly blanketed by heavy silence.

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EARLY IN THE MORNING, Fei Du asked his assistant, Miss Miao, to bring him fresh clothes. He cleaned himself up and had her drive him to Dr. Bai’s place, but when he knocked on the door, it was a middle-aged man who greeted him. The man had a medium build, square face, and wide shoulders; he wore glasses, and his clothes were simple to the point of being almost completely unremarkable. His eyes were like a pair of very thin needles, piercing silently through Fei Du’s skin. Fei Du’s brow furrowed.

He recovered quickly, however, and said politely, “Hello. I’m here to see Dr. Bai. We made plans yesterday.”

“Oh.” The man adjusted his glasses. “Mr. Fei, right? Bai Qian is my wife. Please come in.”

As they spoke, Dr. Bai emerged. Her husband seemed to be in a rush to leave. He said a gentle goodbye to Dr. Bai, then left, carrying his briefcase.

When Dr. Bai noticed Fei Du looking back at the man as he left, she offered a brief explanation. “He works at the Yancheng Public Security University. But he’s really just a nerd. He doesn’t know how to do anything but teach and work on papers. Actually, he edited the book you want to borrow."

Fei Du looked at the book in Dr. Bai's hand: *The Psychology of Victims in Criminal Cases (Third Edition)*. His gaze landed on the name of the editor, "Pan Yunteng."

"How have you been lately?" Dr. Bai asked as she poured him some tea. "Before, you told me that you wanted to do a postgraduate program. That really surprised me. I'd never heard of such a successful man-about-town having a life plan so unconnected to his social sphere. Surely it's not because you've been going over so much academic material with me?"

"I'm just a mascot for the Fei Corporation anyway," Fei Du said unconcernedly. "My father left me an excellent management team. They collaborate well and balance each other out. I don't need to do everything myself, and the other shareholders would prefer I not get in the way with my ideas. They want me to just collect my dividends like a good little boy. They'd love it if the useless nepo baby would go study somewhere proper instead of embarrassing himself with a certificate from some diploma mill."

"Given your circumstances, wouldn't it be better to go abroad and do an MBA?" Dr. Bai asked, confused. "My field is a bit too different, don't you think?"

Fei Du laughed. "Dr. Bai, plenty of rich young masters like me take something like 'Paranormal Studies' or major in the Beatles. Compared to that, my interests aren't that niche."

That made Dr. Bai burst out laughing too. "True. And I suppose you guys don't have to worry about finding work either way. Which aspect interests you? Perhaps I can introduce you to a mentor."

“This is pretty interesting to me.” Fei Du shook the thick book in his hand. Dr. Bai was taken aback until she noticed the expression on the young man’s face, which suggested that he was half laughing at himself.

“I hear that plenty of beauties with good reputations are studying psych,” Fei Du continued. “This would give me a chance to be around them, right?”

It was afternoon by the time Fei Du left Dr. Bai’s place. His phone, which was fully charged, had lain quietly in his pocket the whole time. He thought for a while, then told Miss Miao, “Head to the municipal bureau.”

Miss Miao froze. “Fei-zong, did something happen? Do we need to report something?”

Fei Du smiled at her, and Miss Miao shivered. After several years of working with him, she was adept at reading this young master’s different smiles. The young lord’s tastes, in her opinion, were getting wilder and wilder.

Seeing her expression and the way she kept biting her tongue, Fei Du knew immediately what she wanted to say. “If any documents need my signature, just put them on my desk,” he said kindly. “I’ll return tonight to sign anything urgent.”

“There are a few emails from partners that you might also need to respond to personally,” Miss Miao replied. “When’s a good time for me to come pick you up this evening?”

“There will never be a good time.” Laughing at her offer, Fei Du pushed open the car door. “I’ll call a taxi. What would I do if I got in the way of a date with your boyfriend after work, and you held a grudge against me for it?”

“That bastard doesn’t have money *or* looks!” Miss Miao proclaimed bluntly. “I don’t even know why I’m keeping him around! Give me the word, and I’ll get rid of him immediately!”

“I hope you’ll have mercy on the men kneeling at your feet. Besides, your makeup looks too good today to show only me and the computer. That would be a crime against the heavens.” Fei Du got out of the car. Before he left, he leaned back down and reminded her, his hand on the door, “Drive safe on the way back. Text me when you reach the office.”

***

MISS MIAO AUTOMATICALLY CHECKED her makeup in the rearview mirror and noticed that her lip color was a little faded. After Fei Du left, she whipped out her lipstick to touch it up, then peeked out at Fei Du’s disappearing back. His demeanor was uniquely carefree; from behind, the way he held his casted arm looked no different from the way one would hold a champagne bottle. He strolled into the municipal bureau like a guest attending a dinner banquet.

Miss Miao was different from the “palace steward”—the secretary in charge of various trivial matters around the office. Miss Miao had graduated from a renowned university, and she was very capable. She had offended someone at some point, though, so her career hadn’t taken off initially; it was Fei Du, who thought highly of her, who’d promoted her to her current position.

The younger Fei-zong was known to be “a girl’s guy.” He could tease any girl playfully as if they were friends, but in reality, few people truly understood him. Fei Du did things by the book and rarely overruled upper management’s decisions. He understood that professional matters should be left to the relevant professionals, though in other areas, his rich-playboy energy was very apparent. He was incapable of greed, perhaps because he’d always been well fed and taken care of; he was happy to relinquish some insignificant benefits so that his relationships with shareholders remained amicable. Handling both people and business with ease, he would have seemed like a very “safe” heir…if Miss Miao hadn’t personally witnessed the way he single-handedly gathered all the Fei Corporation’s power.

To Miss Miao’s mind, the strange thing was that their young master wasn’t the type of leader who was determined to forge a new path. He wasn’t ambitious about taking the business global. All he wanted was enough money to spend. It seemed like the way he’d demonstrated his power when he first inherited the role was by intimidating others so that they wouldn’t deceive him. Once he’d familiarized himself with the company’s operations, he’d never overstepped—not even once. In the last six months, the situation had become even more dire: He was out of the office more often than in, and he seemed to be on the verge of leaving everything to his employees.

Apparently, as a twenty-two-year-old, he hadn’t yet figured out what he wanted to do with his life.

But Miss Miao had always had the sense that Fei Du was crafty—that he was someone with a plan. He wasn’t the fickle or flaky type. She glanced toward the municipal bureau, bewildered, and noticed that the building was quite busy today. Then, she drove away with a weight on her mind.

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MISS MIAO WASN'T WRONG: The entrance to the Yancheng Municipal Bureau really was quite busy. Cars were parked all over, both legally and illegally. A parking officer holding a stack of tickets stared at all the vehicles in bemusement, uncertain whether to distribute them. Several employees stationed at the entrance recorded visitors to the building. Normally, only the most basic, chaotic local police stations got this many visitors.

Fei Du, who was following a group, somehow found himself part of the crowd too. He didn't even need to say anything. Uninvolved in the hubbub, he noticed that the visitors varied in age and appearance; people from all walks of life seemed to have shown up. There were serious-looking middle-aged individuals, and there were elderly visitors with weathered faces. Some people carried photos, some looked like couples—and those visitors generally seemed much closer than regular couples, often holding hands and sticking close to each other, as though they had difficulty standing up alone. It was as though they had to support each other just to keep moving forward with uneven steps.

Every so often, a sudden sob burst from the crowd. Whenever that happened, everyone's tired demeanor changed. Yet aside from Fei Du, the curious outsider, no one turned to locate the source of the cries. They all seemed to understand what was going on.

Fei Du's brow furrowed. He had some sort of vague feeling. He often came to the municipal bureau and was familiar with the place by now, so he was able to slip into the building on his own with no one noticing. Just as he was considering making a phone call, he ran into Luo Wenzhou in front of a bathroom in a corner.

Luo Wenzhou's prominent double eyelids had gained new creases from his all-nighter. He smelled strongly of smoke, but he'd just washed his face with cold water; droplets kept rolling down his face and neck to wet his collar and the front of his T-shirt, putting everything in view. Fei Du's gaze surreptitiously followed the lines of Luo Wenzhou's chest all the way down to his waist. If his eyeballs could have taken photos, he would've snapped more than a dozen close-ups of that moment.

Having looked his fill, Fei Du pushed his sunglasses up and started his speech like a gentleman. "Did you discover last night that there were cases before the one in Xiling?"

When it came to crime, no one was quicker on the uptake than Fei Du. Luo Wenzhou had no energy to be surprised by that anymore; he just nodded with exhaustion.

"This seems like a major undertaking." Fei Du clasped his hands behind his back and glanced out the window. "It's typically parents who come to these types of things. These parents seem to span a large age range, though. How far back did you guys dig?"

"Twenty-two years." As soon as Luo Wenzhou heard himself speak, he thought he sounded a little hoarse. He cleared his throat forcefully. "Guo Fei was kidnapped in Lianhuashan twenty years ago, but similar victims and cases were already popping up two years before that. And even after Wu Guangchuan died, they never stopped."

Fei Du took out a tin of mints and passed it to Luo Wenzhou.

"For now, we're theorizing that this has been the work of a group." Luo Wenzhou sighed. "There are plenty of lost-child cases of all kinds every year, and most of the kids are never found. We can only use blood samples or DNA and cross our fingers when someone reports a homeless child, or when a human-trafficking ring is caught. But we often never find children who go missing, dead or alive, so determining exactly what happened to them is very difficult. Usually, these cases are investigated locally wherever the missing child was reported, so by the time those cases get to us, they're just in a year-end report. And as long as the statistics look okay, no one pays much attention."

Fei Du reacted frighteningly quickly. "But even a few years ago, some old officers left from the Lianhuashan case should've been around, right? If even one or two cared as much as your shifu did, never forgetting that case, they could easily have picked up on something ages ago—unless the subsequent cases were missing a key element. That element was the kidnapper torturing the parents, right? In all the missing girls' cases from Wu Guangchuan's death until now, not a single phone call was made to torment the parents."

Luo Wenzhou didn't say anything, but he crushed the mint between his teeth.

"Let's say a gang was using an innocent little girl as bait to get closer to their targets, then taking girls away without leaving a trace. They'd want to stay as inconspicuous as possible," Fei Du pointed out. "Calling the victim's family would be too personal; it wouldn't benefit a group. The gang goes after preteen female victims, but the calls hurt the victims' parents… Know what that sounds like to me? It sounds like the gang lost control of their bait."

How come everyone else has what I don't? Parents, family? Su Xiaolan must've wondered twenty years ago—and Su Luozhan must likewise wonder now. *I have to destroy everything I can't have.*

The call Guo Heng had gotten had been made from a garbage dump in the middle of nowhere. The only road that went there had a toll gate. After several rounds of police investigation, it was clear that the caller had never gone through the toll gate. Rather, they'd apparently taken the highway, parked on the road, and climbed a large hill with the kidnapped girl, Guo Fei, to make that call.

The story didn't really make sense, though, so the police working the case at the time didn't take it as fact. But what if the girl in the call hadn't been Guo Fei at all?

That girl in the call hadn't spoken—only screamed. The source of a scream was actually very difficult to identify; it was even tricky to distinguish between the cries of men and women. It was the bells in the pencil case that had misled Guo Fei's parents, convincing them that their daughter was screaming.

What if Guo Fei had already been dead by then, and the murderer drove with his little accomplice to the middle of nowhere, looking for a place to dump the body? What if, during that time, the girl finally couldn't take the pressure anymore, ran away from the murderer, and came across a public phone? And what if she had happened to come up with a wicked idea?

Luo Wenzhou closed his eyes lightly, trying to imagine what could have been in the twisted mind of that little accomplice. Fear? Disgust? Disbelief? Or sick jealousy and hatred?

He realized he had no frame of reference.

It was like asking someone born in peacetime to imagine what it would be like if war broke out on their doorstep. Most people would think things like, *I'd need to gather my valuables, How could I meet up with my loved ones?* or *How would I survive in the wilderness?* They weren't capable of envisioning a real armed conflict. Even with his extensive experience analyzing the motives of all kinds of bizarre criminals, Luo Wenzhou was essentially a mentally healthy adult male, so he could only approximate the girl's state of mind with meaningless, unfeeling words.

If he was right about what had happened, why had there not been any similar cases in the twenty years following Wu Guangchuan's death? Su Xiaolan all those years ago, Su Luozhan now—what was the connection between this abnormal mother and daughter?

"Can you sneak me in to speak to Su Luozhan?" Fei Du asked him.

That jolted Luo Wenzhou from his musings. *Of course not. What kind of question is that?*

About to refuse, he looked up to see Fei Du leaning against the wall across the hall, gazing silently at him. Luo Wenzhou rarely noticed Fei Du's gaze—adults seldom stared endlessly into each other's eyes unless they were in love or about to fight. And in Luo Wenzhou's memory, Fei Du's eyes were usually icy, taunting, or cynical, every last eyelash screaming *"I don't like you!"* He'd never seemed as quiet or harmless as he now did. In fact, Luo Wenzhou almost thought he'd detected a hint of gentleness in the way Fei Du said "sneak." He paused and found that the "Bullshit. Stop kidding around" just wouldn't make its way out of his mouth.

Cursing his weakness as a man, Luo Wenzhou sighed, but he couldn't help the way his own tone softened. "I'm afraid that would be against regulations."

"Last time, you let me listen to an interrogation—"

"My boss made a special exception."

"Ask him to make one again. After all, I've spoken directly to Su Luozhan before." Fei Du's trademark cynical half smile returned to his face. "Besides, I wrote a little essay about the study of victims, and a professor who noticed it included it in the bibliography of the third edition of his textbook. Oh, right—and in April, I got accepted into Yancheng Public Security University's applied-psychology postgraduate program. By September, I might be halfway to a role on your team. Want to call your previously-very-flexible boss, Sergeant Luo?"

Luo Wenzhou stared at him. *When the fuck did all that happen?!*

If Fei Du's brain had suddenly gone offline—if he'd started racing his car illegally through the downtown core, and Luo Wenzhou had to go and arrest the driver himself, even *that* would have been much more believable than what Fei Du was saying now.

Luo Wenzhou's temples wouldn't stop throbbing. His brain's overloaded CPU, which had only just cooled, seemed at risk of catching fire again. If Fei Du had been accepted in April, then regardless of how rich or connected he was, he would've had to start preparing to apply last year.

Had he woken up one day and devoted himself to academia? Was this a case of acute boredom? Was he doing this in pursuit of Tao Ran? Or had he realized he was tired of this materialistic lifestyle?

At that moment, downstairs—perhaps because it was a bit crowded—someone accidentally knocked a photo a middle-aged woman had been holding to the floor. She hurried to grab it, but a sudden gust of wind blew it even farther away. This was clearly an inconsequential accident, but to a sensitive enough person, it came off as a bad omen. The woman melted down, stumbling to the floor and starting to wail.

Her hoarse-yet-piercing cries ascended straight through the air to stab through the cracks around the hallway windows. In the middle of this unsettling cacophony, an officer from the forensics team jogged over. “Sergeant Luo, the results from the sample you brought yesterday are out! That’s Qu Tong’s blood on the fabric!”

Luo Wenzhou sucked in a breath. He looked at Fei Du for a while, then walked to Deputy Lu’s office without another word.

Twenty minutes later, Fei Du got the green light. He walked into the room where Su Luozhan had been put temporarily with two boxes of ice cream and placed them on the small table. “Want some? Which flavor?”

Su Luozhan looked at him. After a moment’s hesitation, she pointed at the strawberry ice cream.

Fei Du handed her the strawberry ice cream and took the other box for himself. Then he pulled out a pair of earphones and plugged them into his phone. He pulled up a live stream of a soccer match, crossed his legs, and watched as he ate, ignoring her. The pair sat for a while in silence.

Su Luozhan stayed quiet at first, not really making eye contact with him. Halfway through her ice cream, she realized that Fei Du had no intention of speaking, which finally made her curious enough to look at him. Her gaze swept over Fei Du’s shirt and phone before landing on the wrist resting on the table.

For a while, Su Luozhan studied his watch, her head tilted. “Is your watch legit?”

Fei Du didn’t react at all. Maybe he hadn’t heard her. Su Luozhan waited a bit, then reached over and lightly knocked twice on the table, right next to his phone.

Finally startled enough to notice her, Fei Du pulled out one earphone. “Hm? What’s up?”

The volume on his phone was really loud; the announcer’s shouts leaked out into the quiet room. Su Luozhan bit on her plastic spoon. “What are you here for? Aren’t you going to question me?”

“Oh, my colleagues are busy. They asked me to keep an eye on you for a while.” Fei Du seemed unwilling to look away from the phone screen. He sounded incredibly distracted, and he only kept his gaze on her for a second before returning to the game.

When people asked her questions, the girl pretended to be stupid, but when they didn’t pay attention to her, she seemed dissatisfied. At first, she restricted herself to occasional glances at Fei Du, but after finishing her ice cream, she stared at him and started asking questions. “You’re a police officer too?”

“Intern,” Fei Du drawled.

“Do interns have a lot of money?” Su Luozhan raised an eyebrow the same way an adult might have. “Is your watch real, or is it a high-quality dupe?”

Fei Du seemed to find her question very funny. First, he raised a brow in surprise; then, at last, he couldn’t contain his laughter. “You know what a ‘high-quality dupe’ is? Kid, who taught you that?”

Su Luozhan’s expression darkened immediately. She was clearly offended that he was taking her lightly due to her age. This was exactly how this man with the injured left arm had treated her back at the old apartment too. It was like he didn’t believe she could do anything, didn’t believe that she could pose a threat.

She realized that although she felt smug when she got away with her lies, that feeling never lasted long. The point of being a wolf in sheep’s clothing was to eat a sheep; it was no fun endlessly playing the sheep, especially when someone was treating her like one. Su Luozhan bit her lip, carefully assessing whether this man was actually indifferent to her or just pretending. After a while, she couldn’t resist tossing out bait. “Those uncles taught me.”

Fei Du paused but didn’t ask her which “uncles.” “It’ll be fine from here on out,” he said kindly, but still in a coddling, dismissive manner. “Don’t worry.”

That threw Su Luozhan off, driving her to ask, “You’re saying I’m not in any trouble?”

“I’m saying no more bad guys will harm you. As for the consequences you’re going to face, we’ll have to see. But your crime wasn’t serious, and you’re too young to face criminal charges. You’ll probably just be taken into custody for a while and then rehabilitated.” Fei Du mulled it over, then finally paused his damned soccer stream, as though remembering his duty as a police officer. He stared at Su Luozhan with beautiful peachblossom eyes, but when he opened his mouth again, he said the same things that came out of every adult’s mouth. “You kids really need to stop being so trusting. You don’t even know when you’re being used by a bad guy. But what’s past is past, kid. When you’re out of here, you’ll have to study hard. Don’t fill your head with nonsense. You have your entire life ahead of you…”

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WHILE THOSE TWO wasted each other’s time, Tao Ran—who was sitting in front of the security monitor—was already taking a nap. Awakening to Fei Du’s long lecture, he rubbed his eyes. “God, it’s Fei Du speaking in that tone? I totally thought you’d taken over his body or something!”

Luo Wenzhou kicked his chair.

Tao Ran stood to wake himself up, passing his hand over his face. He leaned in closer to listen to Fei Du’s lengthy-yet-useless rant for a while longer, then smiled. “You guys stopped fighting recently. That’s good.”

Luo Wenzhou glanced up at him lazily. “What is there to fight about?”

“Who knows?” Tao Ran chuckled. “I’m not the one who turns into a bristling cat every time I see a certain someone. I’m not the one who argued with him the entire way back from the Huashi District Bureau. Oh, right—and you even asked someone to ticket him.”

Luo Wenzhou held his tongue.

“I’ve told you,” Tao Ran said with a sigh, assuming the role of mediator out of habit, “Fei Du’s a good kid. If you treat him well, he’ll silently repay you tenfold. His tongue’s a bit sharp, I’ll give you that, but on a lot of things, he won’t fight with you. If that weren’t true, he wouldn’t have forgiven you about that sports car so easily.”

Tao Ran expected Luo Wenzhou to respond with a scoff when he finished speaking, but after a long pause, all Luo Wenzhou said was, “Mm.”

Tao Ran blinked. Had Luo Wenzhou just accepted what he’d said—that humbly? Had the sun risen from the west that morning?

Suddenly, on the security feed, Su Luozhan stood up. She leaned forward over the little table, the movement interrupting Fei Du’s lecture. “Do you think I was only being used?” she asked quietly.

“Xu Wenchao has already been arrested,” Fei Du told her gravely. “We still have some questions, but I’m sure we’ll get things out of him soon enough.”

Su Luozhan smiled mysteriously.

“If *you* want to accuse him, of course…” Fei Du paused, then shook his head with a smile. “Never mind. You accusing him wouldn’t be any use. Is there anything else you want to eat? I’ll ask someone to go buy it.”

Su Luozhan ignored the question. “How come it’d be no use?” she pressed.

“Because you’re a kid,” Fei Du said, as if it were obvious. “Children can’t testify. And this is a very serious case. If you did say something, they wouldn’t believe you, and even if they did, you still couldn’t go testify in court. But you know, little girl, I still have to say something. However scared you are, it’s wrong to harm other kids. You were holding a knife when we found you. Do you know how dangerous that is? If you weren't careful, you could've made a mistake and—"

Su Luozhan cut him off. "What if *not* killing her was the mistake?"

Fei Du froze.

Su Luozhan twirled a lock of her hair and looked at him with a half smile, a hunter waiting for her prey to take the bait. "You're so handsome, Gege."

Fei Du turned "serious." He pushed his phone aside and looked at Su Luozhan, his posture very proper. "I know it's hard for some children who've been harmed to accept that they're victims. You might've been misled into thinking that only bad guys are cool or capable, and that all victims are soft and stupid, and they deserve it. You might blindly imitate bad guys, but—"

"Victims *are* soft and stupid, and they deserve it." Su Luozhan made a face at him. "They're like lambs—they only know how to bleat. They're dumb and so easy to lead away. They scream when you touch them and die when you kill them. They're absolutely useless."

Fei Du furrowed his brow as he stared at Su Luozhan in shock and anger. "How could you think that?!"

The moment he had started treating her like a stupid child and trying to "educate" her, malicious impatience had seized Su Luozhan's heart. She wanted to rip that gentle face open. Only just now, when his expression changed, had her impatience dissipated slightly. For some reason, she felt a little pleased.

"Either way, I won't be sentenced, right?" Su Luozhan continued, looking at Fei Du smugly. "Those lambs are so stupid. They'll believe anything. You get close once, and the second time, they treat you as a friend. They’ll go anywhere you take them.” She let out a short laugh. “How funny!”

“Su Luozhan,” Fei Du said, his lips trembling slightly, “don’t speak such nonsense!”

Su Luozhan hadn’t gotten a chance to see Qu Tong’s parents receive that recording, but just thinking about it made her heart itch. Her eyes lit up with excitement as she incorporated this young “intern’s” pain and disbelief into her mental picture. “It’s not nonsense,” she said, her toes kicking the floor innocently. “That’s what my mom taught me. She said that when other animals are in danger, they either fight or run, but lambs just freeze when they get scared, then follow whoever calls them. But my mother was a lamb too. And she was an idiot. I read her diary in secret, and when she was about my age, she got scared too. After that, she never dared to leave her signature again.”

“What signature…?”

Su Luozhan playfully held a hand next to her head as if she were holding a phone receiver. “After the ‘knight’ who protected her died, she was too scared to do it.”

“Knight?”

“Gross, right? He was actually just a ‘dinner guest’ she was close to.” Suo Luozhan chuckled disdainfully. “Our family lives by hunting prey, but my mother didn’t know how to do anything other than catch lambs, and once she got older, she couldn’t even do that anymore. She had to rely on me… Hmph. And now she’s finally dead.”

“Enough,” Fei Du said with great difficulty. “Stop. How old are you?”

Su Luozhan smiled at him. “I knew how to do it by age seven. My mother served the guests the lambs I caught. Sometimes she made me go hunt with those guests, and after the guests had their fill, I’d take the lambs home. What happened next wasn’t any of the guests’ business—my mother would take care of the lambs. She learned that from her own mother.”

Outside, watching the camera feed, Luo Wenzhou stood up. “Go look into Su Xiaolan’s alcoholic mother!” Lang Qiao, who’d just walked in the door, heard that command and ran straight back out.

All Tao Ran’s sleepiness had evaporated. “What…? Is that kid saying Su Xiaolan’s mother made a living off sexually trafficking girls, and Wu Guangchuan was just her client? And why is it that she didn’t say anything when *we* talked to her, but when Fei Du talks to her, she can’t resist volunteering all this information?”

“You guys treated her like a suspect, the way a cop would,” Luo Wenzhou said quietly, focused on the screen. “But Fei Du treated her like an innocent child. He adopted the attitude of a parent, so subconsciously, she wanted to ‘send him a recording.’”

Only Fei Du could keep her talking—not because he’d been a troubled youth himself, but because he alone had displayed the right attitude after they arrested Su Luozhan.

“Impossible.” Fei Du stood up suddenly, accidentally bumping the little wooden table. It fell back to the floor with a heavy bang. “Wu Guangchuan was the culprit all those years ago, and he was killed by the relative of one of his victims. No such kidnapping has happened since…”

He suddenly stopped, eyes widening, as though he'd just thought of something terrifying.

"You just didn't *know* about the next ones," Su Luozhan said, savoring his expression. "But that uncle wasn't innocent anyway. My mother liked him, but he was a huge asshole. Mom wasn't enough for him; he still thought about those stupid lambs. She was blind with jealousy, so she thought of a fun new 'signature.'"

"Have you got the same kind of relationship with Xu Wenchao?"

"No way!" Su Luozhan shrieked, then added in a mocking tone, "Would he be worthy of that? What is he? He's just a last-minute cleaner at most!"

Fei Du suddenly raised his voice. "Then why did you send that recording to Qu Tong's home?!"

Su Luozhan propped her arms on the chair's armrests, giggling. "Because it was fun."

"Boss! The name of Su Xiaolan's mother was Su Hui. She wasn't in the workforce long before her office closed. While she was at home after losing her job, she became an alcoholic. At one point, she opened a gambling parlor—and she owned a secondhand truck."

Chapter 16

"THE GAMBLING PARLOR was demolished, then rebuilt, then demolished again. It's now a business building. If bodies were hidden there, they'd definitely have been found during the rebuilds. As for any other information, it's been too long; we won't have all the records from back then. We're not going to find anything quickly." Lang Qiao glanced at the camera feed of Su Luozhan, who had her cheeks in her hands, and shuddered. "Also, can we even trust what this little maniac says?"

"We can only use her statements as reference. I think her personality is a bit histrionic." Luo Wenzhou stared at the feed, unblinking. After some thought, he continued, "At least we know how the crimes were committed now—an adult worked together with a young girl. First they followed the target, then the girl gained the victim's trust. Once they'd been in contact with the victim a few times, they led her away."

"The day I moved, Chenchen was followed." Tao Ran mulled that over, then added, "If the person Fei Du noticed that day was her accomplice…"

"Let's call him Suspect A." Luo Wenzhou pulled out a sheet of A4 paper, wrote an *A*, and circled it. "And let's call the man driving the car in Qu Tong's case Suspect B. We don't know yet whether A and B were the same person, but I'm leaning toward no."

"Why?" asked Lang Qiao.

Luo Wenzhou tapped the table with the pen cap. "The frequency of the kidnappings. If Suspect A started following Chenchen the day Tao Ran moved, then as of last night, it's been nearly a month. Let's not worry about whether A had the wherewithal to follow two different girls who live in completely different areas—let's just say he does. If someone has the patience to follow a victim for a month, though, then two cases within a five-day period would be way too fast for them. And then there's the third person, Xu Wenchao. He does have an alibi for the night Qu Tong disappeared, so we know he can't be B. What role did he play?" Luo Wenzhou wrote *Xu* and *Su* on the paper and drew a line between the two names. "After Su Luozhan drugged Chenchen and tied her up in the old apartment, she returned home like nothing had happened. She wasn't afraid that Chenchen would wake up and run away, nor that she'd make noise and get discovered. Why not?"

Lang Qiao understood immediately. "Because she knew her accomplice would take over at the apartment!"

"Right. But the accomplice didn't go. Su Luozhan was alerted by a call from the teacher from the youth center, and that's when she ran to the apartment to see whether Chenchen was still there. When she did find Chenchen, she called Xu Wenchao twice." Luo Wenzhou darkened the line between Xu Wenchao and Su Luozhan a few more times, then extended it downward, into two branches. "Zhang Yuchen was terrified that night, so for now, let's put her testimony aside. From this information alone, there are two possibilities: Either Xu Wenchao is Suspect A—the one who followed and tried to kidnap Chenchen—or Xu Wenchao is Su Luozhan's 'manager,' and they help a third party kidnap young girls. Su Xiaolan had been sick for a long time, and there are things Su Luozhan can't do by herself—she needs an adult."

The first time Xu Wenchao was summoned by the police, he’d been surprised; he hadn’t known where he made a mistake. He answered every question very carefully and was even willing to come off as slow. At that point, he probably hadn’t even known about Su Luozhan leaving the recording at Qu Tong’s home, and he probably never expected the police to connect Qu Tong’s case with one two decades ago—until Tao Ran unwittingly alerted him during the questioning.

Through their conversation, Xu Wenchao probably figured out what Su Luozhan had done. Then the police started following him, and when he received two calls from Su Luozhan, he realized he was going to be arrested, so he got his statement ready.

“So what you’re saying”—Tao Ran lowered his voice unconsciously—“is that it’s just like the girl said: Xu Wenchao is only a last-minute cleaner.”

“That…that doesn’t mean what I think it means, does it?” Lang Qiao whipped around to look at Luo Wenzhou. “Does he get rid of… What about Qu Tong, then? Is there really no more hope for her?”

“Last night, Su Luozhan held Chenchen captive in an old apartment building,” Luo Wenzhou said. “Chenchen should’ve been handed over to Xu Wenchao, but we’d summoned Xu Wenchao to help with the investigation, so he never showed up. Still, there was a lot of blood on the fabric in the music box in Su Luozhan’s bedroom. But Forensics didn’t get a luminol reaction consistent with that amount of blood in the old apartment. That means the apartment might just be a transfer point, not the actual scene of the crime.”

“Then where could the crime scene be?” asked Tao Ran.

“Wait! No… Hold on!” Lang Qiao hurriedly retrieved a piece of paper from a stack of files. “Have you guys forgotten something? Twenty years ago, Xu Wenchao went to a disgustingly expensive private high school. When he grew up, he spent his time just playing with photography equipment. Now he’s a freelance photographer with a car, a residence, and no mortgage. His family is filthy rich. And let me be frank: Even if you’re a real freak, if you have the money, you can always find a way to buy whatever you want. Why would he work with Su Luozhan to do such deranged things? He doesn’t need the money, so what’s in it for him?”

Everyone fell silent.

She had a point. How did a man who grew up middle class or better, with both parents present, whose life had been smooth sailing, get entangled with the Su family? If not for Su Luozhan deciding to imitate Su Xiaolan’s ‘signature’ for fun by leaving a recording at Qu Tong’s home, plus Xu Wenchao’s own mistakes, who would ever have suspected him?

At that point, an officer poked his head in. “Sergeant Luo? That old Guo guy, the one who showed up first, is looking for you.”

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GUO HENG WAS WAITING outside the noisy reception room. Someone must’ve thought that he was a sorry sight and brought him a chair; seated, he faced the back door of the on-duty room, but the officers had gone somewhere and hadn’t turned off the TV before leaving. On the dingy screen, a local news station was reporting on last night's dramatic rescue operation at the youth center.

Guo Heng craned his neck to see the screen, automatically straightening his hunched back and sitting up properly. Prisoners were sometimes rounded up to watch TV together—usually the news or a moral-education program. Strict prisons even required the prisoners to sit up straight as they watched.

Twenty years of incarceration had turned a man in his prime into an old man who could never slump freely again.

"Guo-shu," Luo Wenzhou called.

Guo Heng reflexively straightened even more, as though checking his own posture, then looked down. He seemed a little desolate; when his taut face slackened, wrinkles carved a rippling network over his skin. "Sorry to interrupt your work," Guo Heng said in a low voice. "I'm just…worried about how many people showed up. Did I kill the wrong man back then?"

Luo Wenzhou hesitated, then pulled two cigarettes out of his pocket. He lit one and handed it to Guo Heng. "Do you remember that little girl you saved back then?"

"Yes." Guo Heng nodded immediately. "She was really skinny. Looked a little older than Feifei. Pretty girl. What was her name again?"

"Su Xiaolan."

"Yes, yes. That was it." Guo Heng brought the cigarette to his lips carefully, took a huge drag, and held the smoke in his mouth, unwilling to waste it by breathing back out—perhaps a habit he'd picked up from prison. "It's been so many years," he said with a sigh. "Wonder how that kid's doing. When I first got out, I wanted to go see her, but then I figured she might've been married with kids by then. Who'd want to remember the kind of thing that happened when she was a kid? It was better not to bother her." As he spoke, a rare smile appeared on his typically rather sorrowful face. "To be honest, over these last twenty years, I've never regretted what I did. If I'd been too cowardly to do it, that girl might've died. I'm just an old man with no family or career; who cares if I go to prison for a few years? If all that was enough to save a life, it was worth it."

Luo Wenzhou's lips twitched. Looking at Guo Heng's face, he had no idea where to start. Was he supposed to tell this man, "You might really have killed the wrong person. That girl you saved is the actual culprit"?

This man's tragic life, his strict posture as he sat, and the way he held his precious cigarette—wouldn't telling him turn all that into one huge joke?

"Officer Luo?" Guo Heng seemed to have suddenly remembered his objective. "You still haven't told me what's with all these people. Was Wu Guangchuan not the killer after all?"

"Guo-shu, I need you to try to think back to something for me." Luo Wenzhou braced a hand on the back of Guo Heng's chair and rested his weight on it. "Look at me and think carefully. The day you killed Wu Guangchuan, how exactly did you find him?"

Guo Heng paused, not understanding why Luo Wenzhou would ask such a thing. "I told you. There was a boy…"

"He paged you. He was a student at Brocade Junior High named Xu Wenchao, and he investigated Wu Guangchuan with you. I know. After he paged you, do you remember what he said?"

His cigarette between his lips, Guo Heng furrowed his brow. He thought about it for a long time. “I think… I think he said, ‘He took her away at school.’ Yes, that’s right. It was vague, and he didn’t mention a name. When I saw the message, I felt my hair stand on end. I ran to find a public phone and call him back.”

Luo Wenzhou paused. “You called him back, and then? Please go into detail.”

“Then I asked him what was going on and went to find him at the school entrance. He led me to Wu Guangchuan’s house, and the rest was history.”

Luo Wenzhou narrowed his eyes. “That means Xu Wenchao was waiting for your call. After all, junior high students didn’t have cell phones back then, right? Where was he waiting?”

“Near the school. Brocade had good infrastructure; there were a lot of new phone booths around it. That was usually how he contacted me.”

“How long did it take you to reach him?”

“Maybe five or six minutes.”

“So Xu Wenchao paged you, then waited for your call. He explained the situation, and then it took you five or six minutes to reach Brocade Junior High to meet him. After that, you set off together. The whole thing would’ve taken around ten minutes…?” Guo Heng nodded, and Luo Wenzhou continued, “You two spotted Wu Guangchuan. You told Xu Wenchao to go get somebody, and you followed Wu Guangchuan to his door, right? How far was his house from where you guys found him?”

“Not far. Just around the corner.” Guo Heng considered it. “Maybe… a little more than fifty yards… Less than a hundred for sure.”

“Wu Guangchuan took Su Xiaolan from the school to his house. You and Xu Wenchao left from the school too. How did you reach Wu Guangchuan’s house before they did, despite the ten-minute delay?”

“The kid took me through a shortcut, and Wu Guangchuan wouldn’t have risked taking the main roads. He probably had to leave through the school’s back door and go around to avoid a large residential area. But we went right through it, basically in a straight line. The residential districts at the time all had walls around them, but those weren’t very tall, and they had decorative openings made of roof tiles built in. Through those openings, I saw Wu Guangchuan pulling the girl along. I really was young then—after I told the boy to go, I jumped one of those walls and followed them.”

Luo Wenzhou got out a little notebook. “Can you give me a rough sketch of the locations you just mentioned?”

Guo Heng paused for a moment. Then, looking thoughtful, he sketched a rough map, correcting a few spots repeatedly. “What is it? Why are you asking me this?”

“I’m not sure,” Luo Wenzhou said lightly. “Considering where the investigation is now, Guo-shu, things might not turn out as you’re expecting. Will you be able to handle that?”

Guo Heng froze for a moment, then put his hand on the back of his chair and stood up slowly.

“I’ll do my best to give you an explanation soon.” With that, Luo Wenzhou hurried out.

Outside, he ripped Guo Heng’s sketch from his notebook and handed it to Tao Ran, who’d been waiting and now stood next to him. “Can you find out what neighborhood this was? It’s from twenty years ago. Does it still exist?”

Tao Ran took his time turning the paper around and around, examining it. “Wu Guangchuan’s house is long gone. We had someone look into the state of the crime scene back when we first sensed that this case had something to do with the one twenty years ago. Brocade Junior High relocated from that area too. There’s now a gym where Wu Guangchuan’s house used to be, but this area looks like… Hold on. I have to go take a look!”

Fei Du sauntered over to them. Luo Wenzhou knew that it was him without even turning around, because everyone else at the Yancheng Municipal Bureau was busy; they either walked quickly or jogged outright. Fei Du was the only one whose footsteps were as leisurely as always.

The young man wiped his glasses with a corner of his shirt, then settled them back on the bridge of his nose. His aura had seemingly shifted from the sentimental young man who’d kept an eye on Su Luozhan to sinister aristocrat. If he’d gone to see the girl looking like this, she wouldn’t have said a word to him. “Do you know about Fuyuan Memorial Hall?” he asked, dragging out his words.

“The memorial hall at Fuyuan Funeral Home?” Luo Wenzhou hesitated. “Isn’t that where they keep people’s ashes?”

“Su Xiaolan’s ashes are there. Xu Wenchao arranged it. Her personal belongings are with those ashes, apparently. You should go take a look. Maybe there’s something useful there.”

Luo Wenzhou grimaced, deep in thought. “Su Luozhan said something?”

"No way," said Fei Du. "That little brat's way too cunning; she'd never give something like that away. I guessed it. I kept thinking, if you've got a bunch of weak, cowardly stalker clients, then besides providing what they want, you need something on them to at least shut them up. You'd need to keep it someplace very specific, ideally somewhere like a bank safe, with surveillance cameras everywhere and twenty-four-hour security. But it has to actually be safe—not like a bank, where the police could find it easily. If it were me, I think I'd decide that my best bet was storing it with someone's ashes. Fuyuan Memorial Hall has very strict rules, apparently. The only people allowed in are family members who've completed the right paperwork, and an employee lets them in after tapping their card. Visits from mourners have to be prebooked by the cardholder, unlike a visit to a graveyard. Some graveyards are way too lax these days. They'll just let anyone waltz in."

Luo Wenzhou held his tongue. He didn't know what Su Xiaolan had on her clients, but Fei Du sure had something on him. He'd left it behind in the graveyard with that bouquet of little white flowers.

"I didn't mean anything in particular by that." Fei Du spread his arms with a smile. "I just don't see why else Xu Wenchao wouldn't have gotten Su Xiaolan a grave, despite handling her funeral. He doesn't seem short on cash. How about it? Can I trouble you to drive me out there, Sergeant Luo?"

Chapter 17

AN HOUR LATER, Luo Wenzhou parked outside a funeral home on the city's outskirts. A few hearses were parked nearby as well. The funeral home was in front of a mountain, and it was very quiet. Under the looming mountain's shadow, the atmosphere was heavy and gloomy. The only sign of life was the white smoke coming out the chimney from the crematory.

Fei the Half Incapacitated craned his neck to take a look. When he went to push open the car door, he realized the driver hadn't unlocked it. He tapped on the door lightly to prompt Luo Wenzhou, who sat next to him, when the man suddenly asked, "What was last night all about?"

Fei Du leaned back apathetically, playing dumb. "Hm?" That lean backward oozed playboy energy. The corners of his lips rose slightly in what could've been a smile as he turned to look at Luo Wenzhou. "Last night? What did I do last night?" he asked, knowing the answer to that question full well.

Luo Wenzhou was speechless. He realized that, in posing that question, he was really asking for it. Compared to Fei Du's bizarrely suggestive attitude now, he felt more comfortable with the version of Fei Du whose forehead was labeled *I deserve a good beating.*

When the pair were alone together, if either one found himself on the verge of rage, the other was quite likely to goad him on. Fei Du misread Luo Wenzhou's silence as meaning he had nothing to say. His interest piqued, he couldn't help but tease Luo Wenzhou.

"Last night, I decided to provide some of your officers a bit of warmth. Are you about to award me another banner, Sergeant Luo?" The light reflecting off the texture of his irises seemed to ripple outward from his pupils, forming concentric rings of light and dark resembling frozen waves. "What do you plan to put on it this time? Let me think…"

"Fei Du." Luo Wenzhou sighed. "If you keep flirting with me like this, I'll think you have untoward intentions."

For a moment, Fei Du said nothing. Luo Wenzhou had always played the big-brother role. Apparently, all the time he'd spent acting serious in front of Fei Du had given Fei Du the mistaken impression that Luo Wenzhou was someone who actually felt shame.

Fei Du looked back at the dark-colored funeral home. "You must be in an easygoing mood to act this way in front of a funeral home, Sergeant Luo."

"On that note, let's talk about something serious," Luo Wenzhou suggested. "What are you after, trying to sneak onto our police force and leave others to look after your huge fortune?"

"No need to worry about my fortune. I have a reliable team." Fei Du shrugged. "They don't even need to be that reliable, just more reliable than me. Besides, they'll still need me to sign off on any major decisions, even if I no longer oversee the company's day-to-day operations. I'll still have control. And if I really let it all go one day—"

Luo Wenzhou cut off his showboating. "All you'd need to do is sell some random junk of yours, and you'd have more money than a standard civil servant's lifetime income, including the pension they'd receive if they lived to be two hundred and fifty years old, right? Enough. When your dad got into that accident, you were still in school. You were probably barely trying, but still, why didn't you trust that 'reliable team' back then? Why did you spend all that time and energy making sure the company was truly in your hands?"

Fei Du looked up and met Luo Wenzhou's eyes in the rearview mirror. There was a frank severity in his penetrating gaze, the kind you wouldn't show to strangers.

"You didn't take over your father's company for money," Luo Wenzhou said with certainty. "You're investigating him. That means you applied to Yancheng Public Security University for the same reason. What—or I should say *who*—are you doing it for?"

"Maybe I'm trying to get into your pants." Fei Du shrugged, his expression unchanging. "Maybe my tastes have changed, and I'm into niche hotties like you now."

Back and forth, dodging and deflecting—this brat was all smoke and mirrors, merging truth and deceit. He narrowed his eyes, raking his gaze over the high, straight bridge of Luo Wenzhou's nose and delicately defined lips, as if he would seal those lips with a kiss at any second. "Oh, also—how did you know that I didn't pay attention in school?" he asked in a soft, silky voice. "Did you look at my grades on top of secretly getting me little gifts?"

Luo Wenzhou huffed a breath out through his nose. Under Fei Du's playful gaze, he unlocked the car doors. Then, without warning, he roughly grabbed at Fei Du's skillfully designed collar, throwing off his wolfish stance.

“First of all,” Luo Wenzhou said somberly, “my good looks have always been widely acknowledged by the masses. I am a classically handsome man whose beauty will never go out of style. If you think that’s ‘niche,’ it just means you need to read more, you ignorant fool. Secondly…” Luo Wenzhou shot a pitying look at the cast encapsulating Fei Du’s arm and scoffed. “Babe, it’s been years since I saw a man act as shamelessly cocky as you are right now. You? Looking like that? Hooking up with me? You might want to hook up with some calcium supplements first, Fei-zong!” He pointed at the door. “Get the hell out of my car.”

Fei-zong had never lost a battle of seduction. This was his first time meeting such a stiff setback; the feeling was very novel. Having been chased out of the car, injured and uncoordinated, he watched Luo Wenzhou from behind, eyes bright. He was eager to rise to the challenge—but after a moment, he set his desires aside temporarily and followed Luo Wenzhou in silence.

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THE SOLEMN MEMORIAL HALL was stifling. The building’s cooling system was probably meant as refrigeration, not air conditioning, and an eerie chill greeted them as they entered. Several employees eyed Luo Wenzhou’s badge suspiciously, not understanding why an officer would investigate an urn.

“What would you like to see?” asked a manager as he tapped his card and led them in. “We’re not involved in illegal activities, only metaphysical ones. Since when does law enforcement involve itself in things like that?”

Luo Wenzhou looked calm and steady, but it was all for show. He'd just survived Fei Du's full-fledged come-on, and his ears still seemed to ring with Fei Du's husky voice, stirring him up inside. Desperately wanting the whole world to shut up, he retorted impatiently, "Well, what if someone put a bomb in an urn?"

The manager gave him a shocked look. He clearly thought Luo Wenzhou was a particularly inventive madman.

Funeral urns covered an entire wall; the small cubbies went all the way from the floor to the ceiling. Su Xiaolan's was in a corner.

"Area C, Unit 106: Su Xiaolan," the manager read off, verifying the name. "That's her. Her daughter and fiancé placed her here. You can ask whatever questions you need. I'll give you some space and return in twenty minutes." With that, he pressed his hands together, bowed to Su Xiaolan's photo, and stepped out.

Fei Du reached for Su Xiaolan's photo, but Luo Wenzhou slapped his hand away, then pulled a pair of gloves out of his pocket. He examined the crystal frame to see if it had any additional layers. Once he was satisfied that it was completely normal, he handed it to Fei Du and set about looking through Su Xiaolan's personal effects.

"This photo is interesting," said Fei Du.

"So interesting," Luo Wenzhou said, still going through the woman's things. "It's the same one we have in the case file from twenty years ago."

Inside the crystal frame was a photo of Su Xiaolan as a young girl with lots of long, thick hair, red lips, and pearly teeth. Under the cold, eerie light of the urn wall, she almost looked a bit demonic.

This ad hoc storage space for urns wasn't very big. A single glance was all it took to see everything that a family had brought in. In addition to the photo frame, Luo Wenzhou found an old dress, menthol cigarettes, and lipstick—all common objects for a woman to be buried with, nothing special.

"Honoring the dead is just a ritual for the living. The photo of the deceased that people set out often represents how their friends and family saw them. If the photo is selected by someone who lived with the deceased, it's often recent; if they didn't live close to the deceased and see them often, the photo might represent a significant memory. If the deceased had a strong personality, their friends and family could honor their wishes and use the photo that the deceased would have been happiest with—for instance, one that documented their greatest accomplishment. Those are the most common scenarios." Fei Du tapped the crystal frame. "So was age twelve or thirteen the most significant time in Su Xiaolan's life? What about after? Was she already dead to certain people?"

Luo Wenzhou had been making sure that he hadn't missed anything. Before he could respond to Fei Du, his phone rang, "Song of the Fifth Ring"[9] blaring in the memorial hall. The melody echoed as it rose and fell, like something out of a horror film, and Luo Wenzhou broke out in goosebumps.

The manager who'd "stepped out" suddenly appeared out of nowhere, saying weakly, "Please switch your phone to silent, Officer—be respectful in a public area. You're disrupting people's rest."

"Bro," Luo Wenzhou said murderously, "if I weren't being respectful, you'd already be lying on the ground."

The manager didn't dare try to reason with a barbarian. He shrank back.

Luo Wenzhou picked up the call with an ugly expression. "What did you find, Tao Ran?"

"The neighborhood Xu Wenchao led Guo Heng through twenty years back is still there." Tao Ran tugged the collar of his uniform, sweltering under the sun. He took the phone call as an opportunity to jog over to a shaded spot under a tree, where he stood fanning himself with a photocopy of an old map. "God—I'm about to melt. This neighborhood is called Xiangyang Community, and it was one of the first batches of commercial housing twenty years ago. At the time, it was pretty snazzy. An old man playing chess downstairs said lots of rich students rented these residences because of the neighborhood's proximity to Brocade."

"What about that wall?" Luo Wenzhou asked. "Guo Heng said he could see Wu Guangchuan's house through openings in the wall. Can you estimate the location?"

"The area has been rebuilt so many times that it's unrecognizable now. You sure know how to assign an impossible task, Boss." Tao Ran sighed. He wiped the sweat from his brow with his sleeve, then saw an equally sweaty colleague wave to him from not far away. They'd asked a few survey workers from a nearby construction site to come help them work out the old map from what was currently there, using Xiangyang Community as their starting point.

The road had been expanded to more than twice its original size. The site of Wu Guangchuan's house now lay beneath the pavement. It was a good thing the roads were pretty empty in the summer afternoon. Two officers, each carrying a leveling staff, stood in the middle of the road two yards apart. That was where Wu Guangchuan's front door would have been.

Following the weed-infested outer wall of Xiangyang Community, Tao Ran told Luo Wenzhou, "I think he was probably between buildings seven and eight. Guo Heng said that he was facing a corner but had a view of Wu Guangchuan's house dozens of yards away… It'll be pretty tricky to find, Wenzhou. The building's bike storage unit is here, and there's a little path that's tight for even one person—I barely fit sideways. Xu Wenchao led Guo Heng here… But how did he even find this place?"

Before he finished speaking, they both received a text from Lang Qiao. She was at Brocade Junior High, and she'd found some old records. Xu Wenchao's address while attending was Xiangyang Community Building Eight, Unit Three, Apartment 201.

Gripping his phone tightly, Tao Ran turned to look at the mottled walls of the old building next to him. Then he hastily extracted himself from the cramped alleyway, turned, and ran up to the second floor of Building Eight. A rusted-over window along the exterior walkway, although covered in a layer of grease, happened to face the same direction as the window in Apartment 201's master bedroom. Tao Ran's eyes widened, and he got closer. From the window, he had a clear view of his colleagues holding the leveling staves. There were some rocks a few yards behind them indicating where Wu Guangchuan's basement would've been. In the past, many people had rented or sold their basements, so they weren't enclosed and they often had windows. The house was usually surrounded by a metal railing, with flower beds right outside, to prevent anyone from falling off the ledge outside the basement door or from spying on what was happening inside.

Twenty years ago, this city hadn't been what it was today. After 9:00 p.m., the streets had been pretty much empty; there weren't many night owls. Those few who lived in darkness had to survey their surroundings carefully, confirming that it was indeed the dead of night and that no one was around, before they could take off their mask, unleashing the depravity and desire within, and letting loose in a basement that could never see the light of day.

Could a pair of eyes have been watching everything from above back then, from a fateful angle that saw straight past the bushes?

Tao Ran was covered in both sweat and goosebumps. He burst into the office of the homeowner's association and slapped his badge down on the table. "Tell me who owns Apartment 201, please. Has it been sold in recent years?"

"Apartment 201?" The employee flipped through their records. "No. It still belongs to the original owners."

Tao Ran took a few quick breaths. "Their family name is Xu?"

"Not Xu, Sun. They're an old couple." The employee turned to the building manager. "Right, Zhao-jie?"

"Yeah, they aren't young. They have a daughter, and I think she's almost forty now." The middle-aged woman poured Tao Ran a cup of water. He thanked her, but couldn't help feeling disappointed. For some reason, in the hallway just now, he'd had a hunch that there was something in Apartment 201. Turned out he was just jumpy.

Tao Ran was about to bid them goodbye when he heard Zhao-jie say, "Their daughter's doing well for herself. She lives abroad now, and she moved her parents there to live with her. I chatted with the husband back then, and at that point, he told me they wanted to sell the place. Not sure what happened—maybe they couldn't find a suitable buyer?—but the property never changed hands. They might've rented it out. Either way, someone's been paying the bills…"

Zhao-jie stopped suddenly, exchanging an awkward glance with her coworker.

Catching the glance, Tao Ran tried to ask, "Do you know who the tenant is, ma'am?"

She chuckled, then looked down awkwardly. "I'm not sure. I don't really cross paths with them. You can pay the bills online these days, so there's no reason for the residents to come to us anymore."

Tao Ran's looked over at the large words pasted on the wall: *Eliminate safety hazards by cracking down on group rentals.* His expression darkened. "Hold on. You guys aren't illegally renting to big groups, right?"

The looks on their faces immediately changed. "No, no," Zhao-jie said hastily, "there's no way we'd do that. We're very strict here. We forbid group rentals. It's just… Oh, maybe that family has bad luck, because the tenant keeps changing. But I promise it's not a group rental! Listen—"

Tao Ran shot to his feet. "Give me the key!"

He understood now. This sly building manager had made money by silently allowing group rentals in her building. She'd accepted payments from Apartment 201, and when she saw that it was always someone different coming and going from 201, she just assumed it was a group rental.

But was it?

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LUO WENZHOU HAD SEARCHED Su Xiaolan’s entire “house” and come up empty-handed. He turned around to give Fei Du an exasperated look. “You’re not very reliable these days, huh, Fei-zong?”

Fei Du leaned carelessly against the wall of urns. “Can you finish your search before deciding whether I’m reliable or not?”

Then he reached inside the nook and pulled out Su Xiaolan’s urn. It was wrapped tightly in two layers of silk. As if undressing a lover, he flicked a light finger to easily remove the silk, which revealed a small, square hardwood box.

“You’re telling me to look inside…the urn.” Luo Wenzhou wasn’t sure what expression he should be wearing. He could only smile at Fei Du through gritted teeth. “You sure Xu Wenchao is as messed up as you?”

“You *non-messed-up* people have weird hang-ups about this kind of thing.” Fei Du stuffed Su Xiaolan’s urn into Luo Wenzhou’s arms. “You think this urn represents an ordinary person, but at the same time, you assign it extraordinary significance. You think it’s sacred, unlucky, untouchable, something that mustn’t be desecrated…no matter what kind of person the deceased was before she died.”

The box was rather heavy for its size. Grasping it, Luo Wenzhou took deep breaths. “Rituals and taboos exist to ensure that we respect life and death. I’m telling you, Fei Du, if I open this and there’s nothing other than ashes, I’m stuffing you in there too.”

Fei Du shrugged, uncaring.

Luo Wenzhou placed the urn carefully on the floor. Gritting his teeth, he opened the lid and pulled out some moisture absorbers and bubble wrap. Covered in goosebumps, he steeled himself, opened the little cloth bag inside, and reached into it. Then he froze. Looking up to meet Fei Du’s eyes, he pulled a sealed plastic baggy out of the ash.

Fei Du chuckled. “So I don’t have to get in there?”

Luo Wenzhou’s gloved hands dusted the ashes from the baggy. Inside, he found a tiny little diary that measured a bit more than three by five inches. It had a pink plastic cover, quite retro, and the name of the diary’s owner was written on its spine—*Su Xiaolan*.

Su Xiaolan’s penmanship was quite nice, actually, and she connected her strokes with a smoothness children seldom achieved. Mysterious doodles dotted the pages: skulls drawn in ballpoint pen, “blood splatters” in red ink. The pages were hard to look at, intense and disturbing; there were semi-coherent sentences and exclamation marks everywhere.

The day, the month, the year. *That bitch got the fatty to come do me while she counted money by the door. I’ll kill her! Pull out her tongue! Smash her head in with a bear* (beer) *battle* (bottle)*!!!*

That was the first thing Luo Wenzhou saw when he flipped the notebook open. He inhaled sharply, brow furrowing into a knot.

The day, the month, the year. *Deng Ying came over! It suddenly started pouring, and she didn't have an umbrella, so she came to wait out the rain, since she'd come to my place before. Someone was at home, but they were drunk!* (An entire page of ink marks followed.) *The bitch helped that drunkard dragg* (drag) *her into the room. It's over for her!*

The day, the month, the year. *The police came to school, looking for Deng Ying. They asked lots of people, but they didn't ask me, because I stayed home from school that day. Deng Ying's in the bathroom at home. The bitch says we're all in trouble if we don't get rid of her.*

The day, the month, the year. *The bitch put Deng Ying in a cooler and took her away. She told people she was selling ice pops. The cooler stank so bad that I threw up, so the bitch hit me again.*

"Who's Deng Ying?" Fei Du asked.

"I don't know." Luo Wenzhou's dark eyebrows were like an instrument's taut strings. "Su Xiaolan would only have been in fourth grade at this point. We haven't found any victims who'd fit that time frame. If Deng Ying was the first victim, then she probably stumbled across them by accident—she might not have the same traits as the victims who followed."

On a midsummer evening twenty-four years earlier, fourth-grader Deng Ying had been walking home after school when a sudden storm broke out. She had no umbrella, so she jogged a few steps in a sorry state. Then she remembered that a classmate's home was nearby, so she decided to go there to wait out the rain. That classmate had been sick that day anyway, and hadn't come to school, so this meant Deng Ying could pay her friend a visit…

In the wind and rain, scores of blossoms fell from the pagoda trees to infuse the mud covering the ground with their soft fragrance.

Girls didn’t have cell phones in that day and age; they couldn’t call to tell anyone where they were going. Having come up with that sudden idea, Deng Ying ran past a fork in the road that she’d never return to.

Perhaps she hadn’t been the only one facing that same fork in the road.

“So, Su Xiaolan’s mother discovered another use for her daughter at that point,” Luo Wenzhou said in a low voice.

Fei-zong didn’t want to squat like an oversized monkey to look at the little notebook with Luo Wenzhou, so he just sat down on the floor, propping his injured arm up with one leg. Half of his attention was on the case and the other half on Luo Wenzhou, whom he couldn’t help but find interesting. “What’ll happen to Su Luozhan?” he asked, interrupting the sergeant’s thoughts.

“Su Luozhan?” Luo Wenzhou shot Fei Du a confused glance. “What about her?”

“Is she going to be sentenced?”

“Of course not. At most, she’ll be taken into custody and rehabilitated for…around three years, for a situation like hers?” Luo Wenzhou replied lightly, flipping through the notebook. “After that long, they’ll reevaluate her. I’ll ask the local station to keep an eye on her then.”

“Three years,” Fei Du said, arching a brow, “isn’t even long enough to earn a bachelor’s degree. In the interrogation room, when she said it was ‘fun,’ I thought someone would barge in and strangle her.”

Luo Wenzhou didn’t even look up. “I’d already sent my more emotional colleagues out on investigations. They weren’t there.”

“What about you?” Fei Du pressed. “You guys worked the whole night, then got ordered around by the victims’ families. You had to listen to them cry and curse at you all. To keep your cool and stay motivated to finish the investigation, you have to put yourselves in their shoes, right? And now that you’ve finally caught the suspects, not only are they not coming clean, one doesn’t even seem remorseful—and she won’t even be held criminally accountable. Don’t you have any opinions about that? Are you happy with it?”

Luo Wenzhou glanced at him again. “When I started working as a police officer,” he said lightly, “you were still watching cartoons, ‘intern.’”

“I never watched cartoons. I just gamed occasionally.”

Abruptly, Luo Wenzhou changed the topic. “Su Xiaolan didn’t mention in her diary how Su Hui got rid of the body. Do you have any guesses?”

Fei Du stared at Luo Wenzhou so hard that his gaze felt like a knife to Luo Wenzhou’s throat. He almost wanted to sew Fei Du’s eyelids shut. Then the younger man looked away and answered cooperatively, “Me? I’d chop the body up first. I have a car, and they couldn’t test DNA back then—so basically I’d dice it, buy a few bags of ribs, and mix the human remains with the meat. Then I’d toss it all in random places all over the wilderness. If I got unlucky and the pieces were somehow identified as human remains, the police would have a hard time figuring out whose remains they were.”

“No. If the body were chopped into pieces, Su Xiaolan’s diary would have mentioned that.” Ignoring Fei Du’s animated tone, Luo Wenzhou added rationally, “Besides, it’s hard to chop up a body. I doubt an alcoholic woman and a young girl could have managed it.”

“I’d find a way to bury the body, then. Ideally in a totally safe place—a place that would always belong to me, that no one would touch even after my death. If I were overseas, I could have buried it in my own backyard, but that’d be tricky here. Especially back when the concept of private property didn’t really exist. Burying a body would’ve been as risky as burying a landmine; it could’ve ‘exploded’ any day.”

Fei Du tapped his chin. “So, if it were me,” he continued, “I’d choose the next-best option: a place where a body would be difficult to dig up, or where—if a body were discovered—no one would be surprised. Like a secret graveyard in a rural area, or a high-risk flood zone with swamp vegetation. It’s not hard to find a ‘wild’ grave. Many villages still don’t cremate people. There’s always a grave surrounded by flowers somewhere. I’d find a new one, or one that was recently repaired, and bury the body there. No one would notice anything strange about the dirt, and no one would dig that area up again for a long while.

“For that to work, though, the culprit would need to know the area well. Tying a rock to the corpse’s ankles and then dumping it in a body of water might be easier. Over time, both the rope and the flesh would disintegrate, so there’d be no evidence of the weights the body had been tied to, and the bones would sink to the bottom and get tangled in the plants. That’s got great potential to become the next lake-ghost story. Everything leaves a mark in this world; however smart a murderer is, they’ll leave some kind of trace. Rather than fight the entire public security system, it’s better to follow one simple principle…”

Luo Wenzhou watched him silently.

The corners of Fei Du’s lips quirked upward. “…which is not to let the body be discovered. And if the body *is* in danger of being discovered, then don’t let the person who found it go to the police.”

Luo Wenzhou nodded, expressionless. “Good job—very insightful. Your words are worth a decade of study. If you weren’t a weakling who faints at the sight of blood, I’d suspect that you did this yourself. Which reminds me: Why *are* you scared of blood?”

Fei Du’s smile stiffened a little, as though the question caught him off guard. He was silent for a moment, and when he did respond, he sounded rather rigid. “If I knew why, I wouldn’t feel faint.”

With a single question, Luo Wenzhou had transformed this forensic theorist into a silent vase that sat to the side, looking pretty. Meanwhile, having gotten rid of that distraction, Luo Wenzhou contentedly returned to Su Xiaolan’s diary.

“It *is* possible that the body was dumped in a high-risk flood zone with a lot of swamp plants,” Luo Wenzhou said quietly as he flipped pages. “Su Hui’s family was from Pinghai County. Pinghai has always been Yancheng’s water source, and there are all kinds of bodies of water there. She could have… Hm?”

He’d skipped over a lot of mundane details about Su Xiaolan’s daily life as he skimmed through her diary—but suddenly he stopped flipping. The diary was open to a page about things that had happened at school. Su Xiaolan was vicious, calling people “bitches” left, right, and center; it was like she lived on Planet Bitch, surrounded by the creatures on all sides. But what caught Luo Wenzhou’s eye was a photograph tucked inside the diary. It showed what was probably a performance at the school. Six girls stood onstage, bowing to their audience. A row of long, thin legs peeked out from beneath floral dresses. The other five girls' faces had been scribbled out with a pen, and Su Xiaolan stood in the middle, staring at the camera with her chin held high.

Floral dresses—that's right. Luo Wenzhou realized that Su Xiaolan hadn't mentioned floral dresses in her diary yet. He flipped back a few pages.

The day, the month, the year. *That bitch of a dance teacher told us to buy our own costumes. She's afraid people would accuse her of taking some of the money herself* (embezzling). *Told the bitch, and she hit me in the back with a bottle. Die, bitch! Die, teacher!!*

The day, the month, the year. *Tomorrow's the dress rehearsal. I don't have a dress. I ran into that disgusting fatso outside the school. I left with him. He bought me that dress.*

"The first time Su Xiaolan deliberately sold herself was for a floral dress." Luo Wenzhou checked the date. "It was twenty-two years ago, which corresponds with the oldest case we found. She went from being an unwilling accomplice to committing crime of her own volition. Why didn't she seek help before that? What are you laughing at…?"

"Sergeant Luo, you have no empathy at all. Men, women, children her own age—who could Su Xiaolan ask for help? To her, men were disgusting 'customers,' women were 'bitches' who abused her and forced her to do things she didn't want to do, and as for kids… After Deng Ying died, Su Xiaolan was so scared that she subconsciously separated herself from others her age. Think about it. A gloomy girl who went through puberty early and was unlucky enough to also be pretty. Would her classmates have been kind to her? When kids bully someone, they have even more tricks up their sleeves than adults do. On top of that, she hated those other girls for getting *their* dresses so easily.”

Luo Wenzhou had nothing to say in response. He forced himself to refocus on the notebook.

Over the last few pages of the diary, the angry drawings gradually disappeared, all because one person had entered Su Xiaolan’s life.

The precocious young girl had expressed clear affection for this person, especially after finding out that he was actually her teacher. Wu Guangchuan was a “customer,” but he was gentle and kind; he was a teacher, but he had forbidden desires. He was like a verdant plant growing from the shadows, though he had an eerie disposition that made him seem malnourished. He loved young girls, and he often gave Su Xiaolan the attention and protection of a lover.

The day, the month, the year. *I went to his place today. I never tell that bitch when I go, and I don’t take his money. He comes to my place twice a week so that bitch doesn’t have to find me other work.*

The day, the month, the year. *I like him. He’s my knight in shining armor.*

The day, the month, the year. *He said he wants to adopt me so that I can escape that bitch.*

The day, the month, the year—some time had elapsed. *That bitch said he’s been coming for over six months, which makes him a trusted customer. We can give him lambs. I bought rat poison. I’m going to kill her!*

The day, the month, the year. *She really fucking gave him a lamb. And he actually accepted! He accepted!! I hate him!!!*

The day, the month, the year. *I followed him secretly to Lianhuashan.*

The day, the month, the year. *He's looking at others. A little bitch wearing a floral dress.*

The day, the month, the year. *He's in the hospital, and I tricked that little bitch into going to his hotel room. I tied her up like a lamb and left her there waiting for him.*

All that followed was pages full of scribbles. Several pages had been torn out, and the word "hate" was scrawled across several others amid all the chaos. Luo Wenzhou had nearly reached the end of the diary, and there was no more coherent content. But buried somewhere within all that ink was the maniacal, screaming phone call placed during the serial-kidnapping case that had shocked the entire city…and a floral dress that had been cut into pieces.

The costume that she had to get herself had left a floral-dress-shaped mark on her soul. As it turned out, that kind of dress hadn't been in demand from customers; it was just how a young girl relived the process of her soul sinking into the mud.

Wu Guangchuan had helped her, then kicked her back into the endless abyss. Guo Fei's floral dress—an unfortunate coincidence—had become a metal cage in Su Xiaolan's bones that never rusted or broke over twenty years, not even in death. And that cage had been passed down to the next generation.

The diary's last page was stuck to its plastic cover. Luo Wenzhou had the feeling that there was something on it, so he tugged it lightly, and a stack of photos fell out.

The photos had been taken at different times, but most seemed to be secret shots snapped inside a small room with soundproofed walls. The lighting was dim, the blackout curtains always closed. There was a different girl in each photo, as well as a different man. Each of those beasts in human clothing had his face angled toward the camera, so it was easy to recognize.

Fei Du picked up the only photo in the pile that contained a blurry face. It was very old, and with especially bad lighting. The photographer was skilled but had still only captured a vague silhouette. Shot from a distance, a short building stood blurrily in the night, its edges blending into the darkness. The photo was taken from high above, and the camera was focused on a flower bed near the building. A China rose plant there had withered, leaving a gap in the greenery just large enough for a pair of prying eyes.

A thin girl leaned on the windowpane, her hands pressed helplessly against the glass. Her face was blurred, and behind her loomed the shadow of a large, tall man.

It was Wu Guangchuan and Su Xiaolan.

The person who'd taken the photo must have lived across the street from Wu Guangchuan…in Xiangyang Community.

Leading a team of officers, Tao Ran pushed open the door to Apartment 201 in Unit Three of Xiangyang Community's eighth building. The smell that emanated from the empty apartment was difficult to describe. The thick curtains were drawn. Tao Ran pulled them open and found a huge photo pasted on the window that had once faced Wu Guangchuan's house.

The clear photograph put the crimes in that basement twenty years ago on full display. The photo—which depicted a nighttime scene twenty years ago—covered the entire window, not leaving a single gap. It made the viewer question what year it was.

> “The days of my youth, as I look back on them, seem to fly away from me in a flurry of pale repetitive scraps like those morning snow storms…”
>
> —*Lolita*

Chapter 18

IN THE DARK ROOM, luminol glowed eerily wherever it had been sprayed. The floors, the ceiling, the cracks under doors—nothing was free of the large, overlapping patches. It was like a layer of dizzying wallpaper. Especially shocking against the otherwise spotlessly pale floor were the dried bloodstains under the couch; they'd never been cleaned up. Who knew how many years they had lain there before finally being bared again?

Soundproofing material covered the walls. A wall of photos in the living room displayed beautiful countrysides and natural landscapes. They would've seemed very tasteful, if not for the glowing, fluorescent luminol film that covered those photos too.

The bedroom, meanwhile, contained a portrait of a young shepherdess. The frame was around three feet tall and remarkably heavy. A forensic technician stared at it for quite a while, feeling as though something was off about it. When they took the portrait down, they found a camera hidden inside. It had been installed right behind the shepherdess's eye, which instantly made the young girl's serene smile much more chilling.

They found all kinds of knives, chains, and ropes in the locked storage closet next to the bedroom—so many different kinds, in fact, that looking at them was overwhelming. A forensic pathologist would probably have to come and identify them one by one.

But none of this compared to that horrifying photo pasted on the south-facing window.

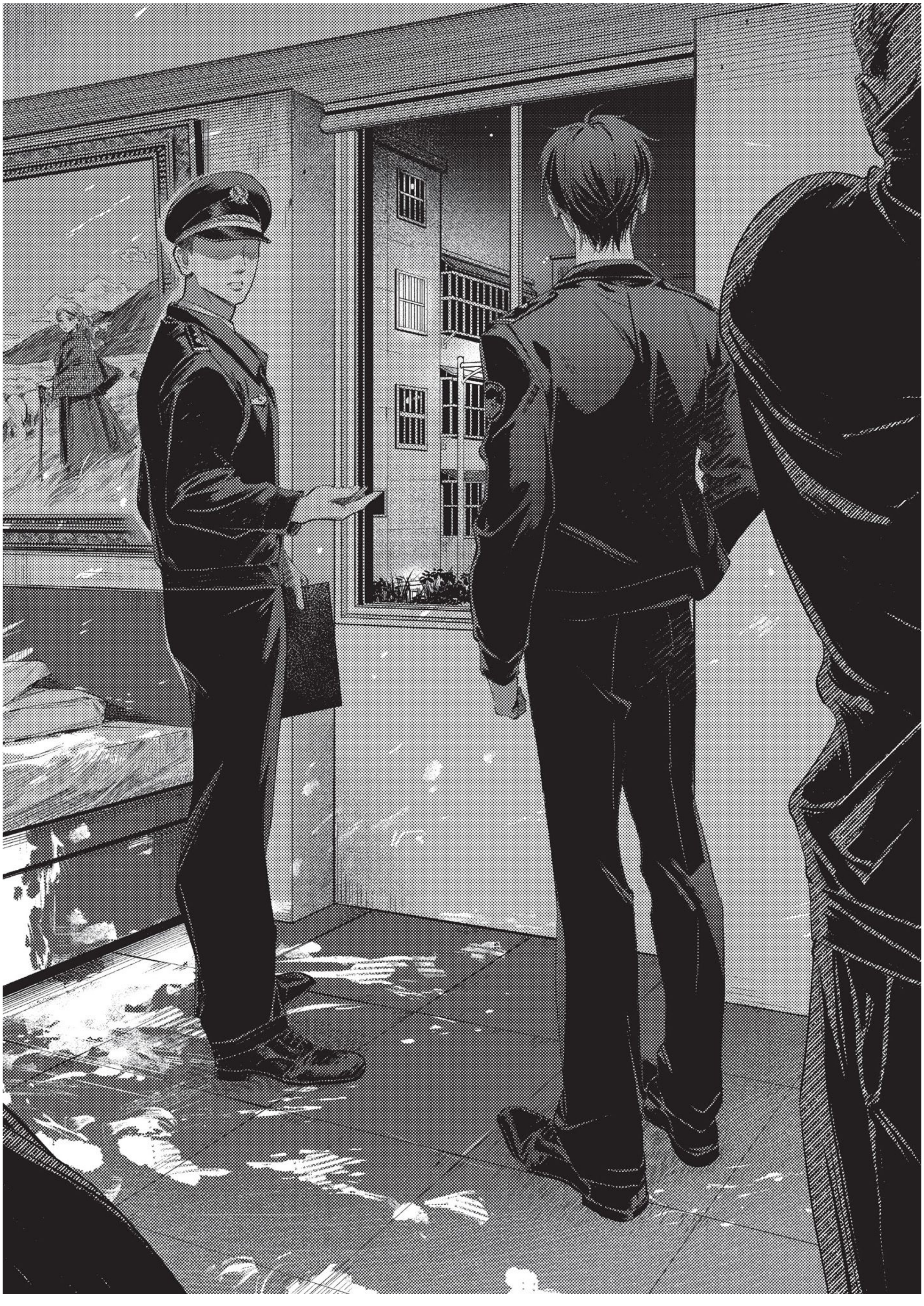
“Deputy Tao, look,” said another forensic technician. “This window is the old-fashioned kind with two layers of glass. They put light-blocking fabric between the two layers and pasted the photo to the inside layer. That way, the fabric would cover the photo and keep light from penetrating, even if a solar storm broke out. And this photo was pasted here in a very particular way!”

The photo was blown up to an unusual and very precise size, apparently scaled perfectly to reality. If one stood in this room in the dark, it really would have been difficult to tell whether it was day or night. At first glance, a viewer would think they were just seeing the scenery outside the window: a thin, narrow road; sparsely scattered rows of old buildings; streetlights more than a hundred yards away; and a flower bed left to grow freely. In that flower bed, delicate flowers grew alongside weeds, but for some reason, a small section of the bed had withered and died. From this high angle, a small, faint light was visible through the withered stalks, an unknown light source reflecting on the window of that barely visible basement. And there, in the corner of that window, a young girl’s blurred face could be seen.

This was important evidence, so two technicians carefully removed the photo and windowpanes.

Tao Ran removed the light-blocking cloth and the outer layer of glass. His pupils constricted, and the sweat he’d worked up running around under the sun all day evaporated in an instant. He could see immediately that the leveling staves and rocks marking the site of Wu Guangchuan’s house matched the photo pasted on the window perfectly.

“Deputy Tao! Deputy Tao!” It was the police intern who’d been left behind to question the building manager. He ran up the stairs, skipping steps as he went. “They admitted that this is a group rental! But apparently people don’t stay here often, so they could all just be white-collar workers who come to nap at lunchtime or something. She said they don’t use the utilities much, so they don’t create any safety hazards, so—holy shit!”



The intern’s eyes bugged out as he stared at the room bathed in the fluorescent shimmer of blood-detecting luminol. He was immediately subjected to a scolding from his colleagues.

“Careful—this is a crime scene!”

“Don’t just barge in without looking! Get out of the way!”

“‘They don’t create any safety hazards,’” Tao Ran repeated, staring unblinkingly out the window. “Can we contact the owners?”

“Th-the owners are abroad. We called them just now, but the number wasn’t in service, so we need to think of alternate options.” The intern suddenly remembered something. “Oh, right—Deputy Tao, Apartment 201’s parking spot isn’t empty. There’s an SUV parked there!”

Traffic police made quick work of identifying the car’s owner. It wasn’t the owner of Apartment 201, nor anyone else related to the case; it was a completely unrelated old man. Though his household was still registered in Yancheng, he’d moved away many years ago. When the police called him, he was at first completely baffled; only after they started asking about his license plate did he get a little panicked.

Further questioning revealed that the plate was his, but the car wasn’t. After retiring, the old man had gone to live with his children in a different city. He hadn’t needed his license plate anymore,[10] so he’d rented it out for extra cash, since it was difficult to get one these days. That wasn’t much hassle; the old man just needed to lend out his ID when it was time for the annual checks, and the renter was willing to pay his travel costs if he showed up in person.

“Are…are you going to fine me? Or dock points from my license?” the license plate’s owner asked. He kept trying to reason his way out of trouble: “I really didn’t take much money, Officer. Only about two thousand RMB a year. If you don’t believe me, I can show you the contract…”

“You made a *contract* to illegally rent out your license plate?” Tao Ran didn’t know what to say. “So, who signed it?”

“Oh, a woman called Su…Su something? Oh, Su Xiaolan!”

A chill ran down Tao Ran’s spine. He spun around to issue orders to his colleagues. “Find out where this car’s been, starting from the day Qu Tong disappeared!”

“Deputy Tao, this car hasn’t got a GPS or dashcam, so all we’ve got to go on is traffic footage. The day before Qu Tong’s family received that recording, the car left the city via the South Airport Highway, then turned onto Yan’gang Highway. Two hours later, it merged onto the national highway, and half an hour after that, it exited onto an area where we had no cameras. The next day, it returned via the same route. At no point did it go to a gas station.”

That meant that after leaving the national highway, the car didn’t go far. “What’s near the spot where he pulled off the national highway?”

“A few villages… Seaside care homes, farm stays, and a village that’s a popular subject for oil paintings.”

Seaside…?

Tao Ran approached the living room photo wall. One of the photos depicted waves crashing into a sea reef at sunset. “We’re finding the locations shown in all these photos. Let’s go!”

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WHILE TAO RAN LED A TEAM out of the city, Luo Wenzhou and Fei Du were driving back.

The sun was setting, but the summer humidity still made it so hot that it was hard to keep one’s eyes open. Yancheng Municipal Bureau had finally quieted down a bit; when Luo Wenzhou got back, his colleagues had recorded most of the information from the victims’ families, and all that was left was for those families to return home and await news. A few people who lived too far away—or refused to give up—remained pacing around the bureau, and the staff and officers could only arrange for them to go eat in the cafeteria.

Luo Wenzhou twisted open a bottle of water, then stole two packets of instant coffee from Lang Qiao’s desk, dumped them into the bottle, and shook vigorously. The instant coffee refused to dissolve fully; some clumps still floated in the water, giving the mixture a unique color and an even more unique taste. Under Fei Du’s shocked gaze, he chugged almost half the bottle.

“What are you looking at?” he demanded of Fei Du. “I’m not drinking piss.”

Fei Du felt like his eyeballs had somehow swallowed a big gulp of that cold perfumed-oil coffee. He felt his stomach protest; looking away quickly, he stared at the photos they’d dug out of the urn.

“Even if they have strict rules on who could become a ‘group member,’ isn’t five suspects too few? Over the course of two decades, hundreds of girls have gone missing.” Fei Du lightly tapped the photograph in his hand. “Besides, these look pretty new. They’re probably from recent —”

Suddenly, he fell silent. Luo Wenzhou glanced questioningly at him.

Wrapping an eyeglass-cleaning cloth around his hand, Fei Du carefully picked up a photo. It showed a man gazing upward. He looked refined; he was around forty years of age and not bad-looking.

Everyone captured in these photos had been snapped from several angles. The pictures seemed to have been taken covertly, and Su Xiaolan had probably chosen those in which the men were easiest to recognize. In his other photos, this man looked either wretched or sinister; only in the photo Fei Du held was his expression less distorted and more clearly human.

“He looks familiar,” Fei Du muttered to himself, rubbing his chin. “Familiar… But I can’t place him, so I must not have met him for business. When I accept a business card, I always take note of the facial features of whoever I got it from. Then I write a description on the back of their card afterward, so that I won’t make things awkward by taking too long to remember them the next time I see them. That isn’t someone I hang out with either. My social group’s not that large, and even if someone new was brought in, it wouldn’t be an…unremarkable old man like this. His face only rings a faint bell, so we must only have met once. I don’t commit people to memory unless I speak to them or stare at their photo for over ten seconds. Even then, I don’t remember people for more than a month, which means I’ve seen him in the last thirty days.”

Sipping his piss-like coffee, Luo Wenzhou listened with great interest as Fei Du analyzed his memories. Fei Du was familiar with himself the way a nerd was familiar with the components of his computer: He treated his brain like a treasure trove, and he could talk about it precisely, objectively. He couldn't remember every single thing, but all his actions followed certain patterns.

It was like he routinely opened up his brain to analyze and deconstruct every single thought.

Just now, Fei Du had quickly gone through what he'd done over the past month. The only places he'd gone in the last thirty days besides his office, his apartment in the city, a few entertainment spots, and his friends' homes were the hospital and the care home. A middle-aged man with a beard and long hair—that wasn't really the appearance expected of someone who worked in a medical facility. The man wore an understated midrange Swiss watch, which meant he had some money. He wasn't a waiter—but he wasn't exactly rich either, so logically, he wouldn't show up in the kinds of places where Fei Du's clique liked to hang out…

At that moment, Lang Qiao burst in, distressed. "Boss, you're finally back! I never want to handle victims' families again! I—"

Luo Wenzhou raised a finger to silence her.

"The musician," Fei Du said suddenly.

Lang Qiao looked baffled. "Musician?"

"His photo was on the wall at that racing club in Xiling. He wasn't playing the club the day Qu Tong went missing, because the boss had invited an indie band. Yeah… If the suspect followed Qu Tong's bus and encountered the passengers being held hostage, then if they were unfamiliar with the area, they would've left and avoided the whole situation, not run with the opportunity."

“No wonder the security cameras never picked him up. He’s from the area. Su Xiaolan’s services require a ‘membership,’ so these scumbags must have ways to introduce new people to the ‘club.’ Even if the main culprits refuse to admit anything, would those guys be as stubborn?” Luo Wenzhou turned to Lang Qiao. “You don’t want to take care of the victims’ families, so how about making arrests?”

Hearing the word “arrests” injected Lang Qiao with adrenaline. Her mopey attitude vanished into thin air, and she took the photos and sprinted away without another word.

Luo Wenzhou picked up the file and kicked a napping coworker awake. “Get up. Come question Xu Wenchao again with me.” The officer followed Luo Wenzhou out.

Fei Du stood and stretched gingerly. The oppressive stench of cigarettes and perfumed oil was all around him here, and he didn’t feel like he could stay any longer. Just as he was about to leave, however, Luo Wenzhou returned.

“I have a few things to tell you,” Luo Wenzhou said, “but I have to take care of some serious business first. Don’t leave. You can wait in my office.” He rushed off again.

Fei Du hesitated, having taken only a single step. After a moment, he retracted his leg.

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XU WENCHAO WASN'T as unconcerned as Su Luozhan. From the way his eyes had sunk into their sockets, it was clear that he'd had a sleepless night. He'd been prepared for the police to take turns questioning him all night long. That would have been nothing; he had ironclad alibis for when both kidnappings occurred. That was why Su Luozhan had been bold enough to throw him under the bus.

Yancheng Municipal Bureau wasn't some little station in the middle of nowhere. People watched the officers' every move, so they wouldn't dare extort a confession from a little girl who wasn't even fourteen. As for Xu Wenchao, they could keep him for a certain amount of time, but without concrete proof, they'd have to let him go.

Xu Wenchao had been prepared. But for an entire night and day, no one had paid attention to him. It was like the entire bureau had forgotten his existence.

Nothing showed on his face, but as time passed, he gradually lost his confidence. Had they believed his alibi and given up investigating him? That would be the best-case scenario…but if he'd been cleared of suspicion, then why was he still here?

Just as Xu Wenchao's heart started to pound, Luo Wenzhou walked in.

"I smell like smoke," Luo Wenzhou said, pulling over a chair and sitting down in front of Xu Wenchao. "My apologies. We were busy all night figuring out exactly what you were hiding."

Those words shocked Xu Wenchao. He subtly adjusted his posture and looked at Luo Wenzhou steadily. "I have nothing more to say."

Luo Wenzhou smiled at him, then asked offhandedly, “What’s your relationship with Su Luozhan?”

“I was her mother’s fiancé,” Xu Wenchao said patiently. “Officer, I’ve already answered that question.”

“I know you were Su Xiaolan’s fiancé.” Luo Wenzhou raised a brow, suddenly giving him a meaningful look. “But I want to know why you planned to marry her. Was it because you still had feelings for that used woman—or had you set your sights on her daughter?”

Xu Wenchao froze, and then his eyes widened. Barely keeping his anger in check, he snapped, “Watch what you say, Officer!”

Luo Wenzhou’s expression didn’t change. “Su Xiaolan was a single mother with no education, relatives, or proper job. How she supported herself is a mystery, and there are plenty of ugly rumors about her out there. You, Mr. Xu, have a career, a car, a residence, and good looks. You’re an ideal mate, so I keep wondering—why wouldn’t she want to marry you?”

“Marriage and love can’t be boiled down to material means,” Xu Wenchao said, doing his best to restrain his temper and maintain his usual demeanor. “Besides, that was a private matter between her and me. I think —”

“Did she really not care for money? Or was it that you didn’t want to marry her either?”

“What does this have to do with the case?” Xu Wenchao demanded coldly. “You can question me about the case, even if I’m innocent, but you can’t insult my—”

Luo Wenzhou interrupted him again. “Insult your what? Insult the ‘love’ you pasted onto the south-facing window in the bedroom of

Apartment 201, Unit Three, of Xiangyang Community Building Eight?”

Xu Wenchao stiffened, the color draining from his face. The interrogation room fell silent.

Xiao-Wu, who was taking notes to one side, had just awoken from a nap in the office, and he had yet to learn about the latest developments from his colleagues. Flipping the page, he was about to seize the chance to yawn, but his yawn got caught in his throat when he heard Luo Wenzhou’s words. He stared dumbly at Luo Wenzhou, then at Xu Wenchao.

Xu Wenchao’s ears were ringing. The annoyance and anger that Luo Wenzhou had brought out in him were like a fuse, and now a shocking lightning bolt struck down from the sky and ignited a huge blaze. With great difficulty, he squeezed a single sentence from his throat. “What…are you talking about?”

“Xiangyang Community, Building Eight,” Luo Wenzhou repeated clearly. “Your photographic work from when you were young is still on the window. There are also bloodstains, which means we can test DNA. The SUV in that apartment’s parking spot has your hair in it, and just now, Su Xiaolan ‘personally’ handed me the photos from the camera hidden in the painting.” He knocked on the table, smiling. “Can we have a proper conversation now, Mr. Xu?”

Xu Wenchao’s chest rose and fell violently. He didn’t have time to mull over how the police had found the apartment, nor whether he’d actually left evidence behind in that car. When he heard the apartment’s address, he knew it was over. For more than half a minute, he sat there like a statue, his ears ringing. He lost himself in his own world, forgetting the police officer in front of him, the ever-present security camera, and the small, dark, cramped room.

Having gone through higher education, Xu Wenchao had a greater-than-average intellect. He knew right from wrong and could clearly identify the red line that marked what was legal and morally correct. He knew what he was doing and understood the consequences, but he just couldn't stop. All he could do was be as careful as possible—cover up his crimes as best he could, carefully erase all traces.

It gave him the impression that he'd spent years floating in a bog; half of him was exposed to the daylight as he mingled with regular people, thinking about his life the same way others thought about theirs and sharing most people's political beliefs. But he never looked down, because the other half of his body was firmly mired in ice-cold sludge.

He'd split himself in two for a long time, but just now, a powerful external force had pushed the exposed, sunlit half of his body down into the mud too. Frigid, stinking filth flooded his nose and mouth, and he suddenly couldn't breathe.

Luo Wenzhou waited patiently for a while, then continued. "Your photographs were so clear that I could count the pits on people's faces. We've already verified the identities of everyone photographed and summoned them for questioning. It would've been even better if we'd had their contact information and addresses. Why didn't you compile those too?"

As Luo Wenzhou spoke, Xu Wenchao's unfocused gaze fell upon his face. After a while, Xu Wenchao's eyes seemed to focus, and he responded, "It's no use."

“What did you say?”

“It’s no use,” Xu Wenchao repeated quietly. “You won’t find any evidence, and the people in the photos will never admit it.”

At this point, Xiao-Wu had finally been shocked fully awake by his superior and the suspect. Through his earpiece, his colleagues updated him on everything that had happened today, finally catching him up. Furious, Xiao-Wu slapped the table. “We won’t find any evidence? The blood and weapons in there aren’t evidence? The photos aren’t evidence? What the fuck would you want as evidence?”

Xu Wenchao glanced at Xiao-Wu calmly, a hint of sadness and pity in his eyes. “Those photos are from years ago.”

Xiao-Wu didn’t understand. He wanted to grab this monster by the collar and shake him, forcing him to make sense. But Luo Wenzhou already knew what Xu Wenchao meant. The “customers” that Su Luozhan had spoken of only purchased the girls. They didn’t participate in anything after the fact. Did they know what would happen to those girls afterward?

Under the circumstances, Luo Wenzhou wasn’t giving them the benefit of the doubt. He was sure they knew. But they wouldn’t have to admit it. *“I didn’t know where the girl came from.” “I was introduced by a friend—I only went a few times.” “How could they have been kidnapped? How could they have been killed? They told me they were doing that willingly.”*

Even if they found the victims’ bodies, they would’ve been dealt with in a way that made it difficult to find any clues on them. In all likelihood, law enforcement wouldn’t find *any* direct evidence linking those men to the more recent kidnappings. The photos in the urn proved only that they had sexually assaulted girls at some point in the past. If those photos had been taken before the child-prostitution law was abolished, then—following the principle of lighter punishment—even if the all-powerful Heroine Lang arrested all five of the men in the photos, she'd merely have caught a few perverts participating in child prostitution, and they'd be fined and imprisoned for three to five years at worst.

But would this case, which had spanned over twenty years, really only have five perpetrators? And was three to five years a long enough time to pay for these crimes?

What a cruel joke!

"Their sentences will be our problem as public security officers. Thanks for your concern," Luo Wenzhou said, not batting an eye. "But however considerate of us you are, we won't be giving you a banner. Why not come clean about what you've done? In my opinion, even if other people get away with it, you—Xu Wenchao—can't deny that you repeatedly participated in the kidnappings of young children, murdered them, and then dumped their bodies. What do you have to say for yourself?"

"So as an outsider, I'll ultimately have to face all the consequences. What an absurd thought." Xu Wenchao unclasped his hands and spread them. "To be honest, I never touched Su Luozhan or the others. And I never took a single dollar. I'm not a monster."

Luo Wenzhou chuckled coldly. "Then what did you do? Snap photos and then take care of the aftermath? What a model citizen you are."

"I did it for Su Xiaolan." Xu Wenchao looked down, his gaze far away. "I was drawn to her the first time I saw her at school. There was something special about her. I’d never seen another girl like her. I tried to get close to her, but she was too solitary. She kept missing classes. Other than our homeroom teacher at that point, Wu Guangchuan, no one seemed to know how to get in touch with her. And when we got to eighth grade, our new homeroom teacher often wasn’t sure where she’d gone either. That was when I realized she only seemed to care about Wu Guangchuan.”

“So you started following Wu Guangchuan even before Guo Heng?”

“Did I even need to follow him?” Xu Wenchao smiled bitterly. “My mother lived with me by the school, but she also had her elderly parents to take care of. She was always traveling between them and me, so she was only around at mealtimes. Su Xiaolan was my first love, the kind you think about all day and night. Once, I woke up in the middle the night—as young boys do, Sergeant Luo, I’m sure you understand—took out a photo I’d secretly taken of Su Xiaolan during a school celebration, and put it beside my bed to ‘relieve stress.’ My bed was right next to the window, and in the summer, I didn’t draw the curtains. So I happened to see Su Xiaolan and Wu Guangchuan returning home.”

“In the middle of the night?”

“After midnight,” Xu Wenchao specified. “Wu Guangchuan was very careful. What I saw later…far exceeded my expectations. And you know how young people’s imaginations can be a little vague around the edges. I was so shocked that I forgot about anger and jealousy. I saw the whole thing from beginning to end. It wasn’t until daybreak that I realized something was wrong. Wu Guangchuan was a teacher, so hadn’t this been a crime? I was disgusted, and I wondered whether she was being forced. So I set an alarm, readied my binoculars, and got out the camera and lenses that I’d spent ages begging my family for.”

Luo Wenzhou held back Xiao-Wu, who was about to interrupt. “How did you discover that Su Xiaolan wasn’t just a victim?” he asked calmly, twirling a pen around his fingers. “Wu Guangchuan didn’t bring other kidnapped girls home, did he?”

Xu Wenchao closed his eyes and broke into a self-deprecating smile. “I really don’t know *what* got into me then. She was the only thing I could think about, and whenever I thought of her, I was upset—but I still longed for her. I was full of grief and rage, and I wanted to rip Wu Guangchuan apart with my bare hands. One day, when I couldn’t bear it anymore, I lied to the teacher, saying I was sick. I went looking for Su Xiaolan and saw her with an unfamiliar girl. I hesitated and didn’t go up to them—just left quietly. But soon after, I found out that that girl had disappeared. It even made the local news. That was when I started to get a bad feeling. The next day, I went to her place on the grounds that I was bringing over her homework. I saw her cutting up a dress. It was…the dress that girl had been wearing that day.

“She panicked and asked me not to tell anyone. I was scared. Honestly scared. I didn’t even have the guts to think hard about the whole thing. It felt like the sky had fallen… But in the end…in the end, I couldn’t bring myself to expose her, and I agreed.” Xu Wenchao reached up to cover his face. “I was the class representative. It was easy for me to get a day off ‘sick.’ The teacher trusted me, so I didn’t need a note. But for Su Xiaolan, I spied, lied, and covered up for criminals. I gave up my normal life for her… She ruined me, she ruined me completely, but I still liked her so much.”

“Did you see Su Hui at her home?”

“Su Hui?” Xu Wenchao snorted. “If I’d run into that demon, do you think I’d be alive to speak to you now?”

Luo Wenzhou massaged his temples lightly with his thumbs. “Do you mind if I smoke?” he asked politely.

“Could I have one too?”

Luo Wenzhou handed a cigarette over readily. “I wouldn’t have figured you for a smoker.”

“I’m not.” Xu Wenchao accepted the cigarette, his fingers trembling but his tone a little more relaxed. “I occasionally smoke a few during social obligations, but I don’t really smoke on my own… Sorry, but today has been really painful. I’ve kept all this hidden for over twenty years. I always pretended that none of it ever happened. Nobody knows, not even the people I’m closest to.”

“Mm.” Luo Wenzhou glanced at his phone; there was no news from Tao Ran and Lang Qiao. The smoke break eased the atmosphere between the officer and his suspect. “I think I can understand,” Luo Wenzhou said amicably. “But can you tell me what you were thinking when you helped Guo Heng investigate Wu Guangchuan?”

“At the time, I thought Wu Guangchuan was forcing her to do things.” Xu Wenchao exhaled a lungful of smoke. “I promised Su Xiaolan I wouldn’t tell the police or anyone else, because otherwise, her life would be over. I was so naive back then… A young boy always wants to be a hero. I wanted to get rid of Wu Guangchuan myself and save Su Xiaolan. While I was following Wu Guangchuan, Guo Heng discovered what I was doing. He was investigating Wu Guangchuan secretly, just like me. I thought we were both doing it for the people we loved. I felt bad for him. Plus, I figured it would be a little safer to team up with an adult. It never occurred to me that he'd stab Wu Guangchuan to death. If I'd known, I would never have helped him."

"Why not?"

"That man was crazy. It was a good thing that I never told him what Su Xiaolan did, and that Wu Guangchuan died before he could say anything, or Su Xiaolan wouldn't have walked out alive." Xu Wenchao took two deep drags, then exhaled. It looked like smoke was coming out of all his orifices, blurring his face. "Thinking about it now still gives me the chills."

"Gives you the chills…" Luo Wenzhou's eyes bored into him. "After Wu Guangchuan died, what was your relationship with Su Xiaolan like?"

Xu Wenchao fell silent for a while. He looked up with difficulty, adjusting his posture, as if his collar was bothering him. "She hadn't been forced at all. She'd done it all willingly. She was like an opium poppy growing among roses, toxic to the core. And she actually…she actually truly loved…" Xu Wenchao wiped his face roughly. "After that, she seemed to wither away, like she was a zombie. I couldn't believe it. Can you imagine my helplessness? And I had to pretend not to know. I saved up my allowance for so long just to buy her once from her mother."

"Hold on." Luo Wenzhou paused. "Su Luozhan isn't your daughter, is she?"

"No," Xu Wenchao said immediately. "I never touched Su Xiaolan. When I paid for her, I only wanted to spend time with her. It wasn't how you're thinking. She was so vicious, so messed up, but I still loved her. I couldn't stop her, nor myself…"

Xiao-Wu, who'd spent the whole day being harassed by the victims' families, reached his breaking point. He looked as though he was about to jump up and beat Xu Wenchao's artsy head into a pulp. Once again, though, Luo Wenzhou held him back. His grip on Xiao-Wu was so strong, his hand could've been forged out of metal.

"Boss!" Xiao-Wu protested.

"Wait. I've got a few more questions," Luo Wenzhou said in a low voice. "Xu Wenchao, when did you start handling the aftermath for Su Xiaolan? And what role did you play overall?"

"After Su Hui died…" Xu Wenchao took a moment to think about it, then sighed. "About ten years ago now. Su Xiaolan prayed for the woman's death every day, but when she really did die, her daughter felt alone and helpless. And the gambling parlor her mother owned was about to be torn down. Su Xiaolan said she could only ask me for help; she didn't trust anyone else. What else could I do? I had no boundaries when it came to her. At the time, the owner of an apartment in Xiangyang Community was about to move overseas. I was making a decent amount that year, and my family gave me some money, so I bought it. The original owners left in a hurry, though, so we never got around to exchanging the deed." He lowered his head. "I let her use that apartment."

"Oh—I get it," said Luo Wenzhou. "At first, Su Xiaolan was a young girl. Before she could grow up, she got pregnant, then became a mother, so she could always play the role of someone who needed help. She used that to set the girls at ease, then kidnapped them, sold them to perverts, and killed them to keep them silent, with you providing a location and then getting rid of the bodies afterward. How? You chopped the bodies up, then dumped them somewhere. Did I get it right?"

Xu Wenchao took a deep breath and covered his face, not denying it. “She died, but the nightmare continued. I realized that child…Su Luozhan…was a carbon copy of her. I didn’t meet the requirements to adopt her, so I’ve been racking my brains to think of something. I let her out of my sight once, and she…she actually contacted those guys by herself. Can you imagine how shocked I was to hear about that girl going missing in Xiling, and then to be summoned here immediately so that you guys could ask me about that case twenty years ago?” Xu Wenchao stared at Luo Wenzhou with red eyes. “Arrest me, so I can be free from all this. I’ll never have to—”

Before he could finish, Luo Wenzhou’s phone vibrated, and a voice message from Lang Qiao came in. “Boss, I caught the bastard! He won’t admit it, even now that he’s seen the photos. He insists he didn’t know anything. Just wait until I find the others!”

Xu Wenchao’s sob story didn’t move Luo Wenzhou. After listening to Lang Qiao’s message, he put down his phone, and his previously calm tone suddenly changed. “Don’t be so eager to vent your emotions. I have a few more questions. You said that you couldn’t control Su Luozhan and didn’t know anything, right, Mr. Xu? But that wasn’t it, was it? That wasn’t what she said. She said you were very cooperative, and that you dressed up as an old blind man to follow Zhang Yuchen. You waited until she was alone to scare her, then had Su Luozhan appear so that she could gain Zhang Yuchen’s trust. Did that happen?”

The Su family was always in control of how their group operated; those who “innocently” purchased their services just had to pay and enjoy themselves. With the customers unwilling to involve themselves in risky kidnappings, the Su family must’ve chosen the victims. Everything from choosing a target to following them to the actual kidnapping was one single, strictly controlled process. Singling out Chenchen a month earlier, gradually learning her daily routine, and then making a move at the right opportunity—it fit that pattern.

That meant that the “ring” they’d envisioned, in which each culprit chose their own target and then sent Su Luozhan in as bait, was impossible.

Xu Wenchao was way too smart. After recovering from his shock, he’d deduced what clues the police had found and made up a story that fit what they knew but exonerated him as fully as possible. He was just hiding the crime for the person he loved; he was merely an accomplice who helped get rid of the bodies. But his statements—combined with Su Xiaolan’s diary—unwittingly gave away the core strategy with which the crimes were committed.

That meant he was the one who’d followed Chenchen. There was no one else. He hadn’t been forced to keep the secret—he was one of their main culprits!

But then, why had Qu Tong’s case happened so unexpectedly? And why was Xu Wenchao so shocked to be summoned for questioning over Qu Tong’s case and learn that Su Luozhan was copying the cases from twenty years earlier?

The only explanation was that Su Luozhan had kidnapped Qu Tong all on her own. Xu Wenchao had lost control of the girl. Trying to free herself from the “cleaner” she looked down on, she’d accepted a “private job” from a customer.

“Xu Wenchao, you were disgusted to discover the relationship between Wu Guangchuan and Su Xiaolan. You suspected Wu Guangchuan of rape, but you didn’t tell anyone that. Instead, you started spying and secretly taking photos.” Luo Wenzhou watched him intently, not giving him time to react. “Did you enjoy it? Were you satisfied? Did you still crave it all these years later?”

Xu Wenchao pursed his lips, but his pupils dilated slightly. Small beads of sweat formed on the tip of his nose, and he couldn’t control the bob of his throat.

“You said that you saw Su Xiaolan with an unfamiliar girl, and you didn’t approach them. Why couldn’t you say hi to a classmate when someone else was around? It was because you didn’t plan to say hi at all, right?” Luo Wenzhou suddenly stood and grabbed Xu Wenchao’s collar. “Su Xiaolan was cutting up a floral dress at home, but you found her. How, huh? The dress would incriminate her as a murderer—wouldn’t she have hidden it before she opened the door? It was because you broke in, right? When Su Hui was away, you took the chance to break in while the girl was all alone… What were you planning to do, Xu Wenchao?”

“I didn’t—”

Luo Wenzhou lowered his voice. “You never touched those girls,” he said in Xu Wenchao’s ear, “because you can’t get it up. You put a photo of Su Xiaolan at thirteen with her urn, and glued an old photo from twenty years ago to the window, because you were in love with that cold, perverse, unflinching murderer—not the ‘lamb’ who was frightened by Wu Guangchuan’s death, who could only be controlled by you and her twisted mother.

“Let me ask you.” Luo Wenzhou’s smile was almost malicious. “Would you only get excited if you saw her kill someone and dismember the body, just like all those years ago?”

Xu Wenchao tried weakly to pull Luo Wenzhou’s hand off of him. “I…”

“How come you suddenly wanted to marry Su Xiaolan? Because, twenty years later, you saw that Su Luozhan had grown into a carbon copy of her mother.” Luo Wenzhou let go, just like Xu Wenchao wanted, and let him fall back into the chair. He looked down at the suspect. “Are you an animal? Of course not. Animals are better. They can work or be slaughtered for food. Would you even be worthy of that?”

Chapter 19

LUO WENZHOU HAD his own private office, but perhaps for ease of communication—or maybe because he was too chatty to bear staying in a room on his own—it was always open to the outside. There was a door, but it had probably last been shut a geological age ago. A heap of the whole team's random junk now held the door flat against a wall; it might as well not have existed.

His office plants were well tended to. Flowers and greenery flourished in charming disorder near the windowsill; the light-loving plants stood closest to the window, and those that preferred shade were clustered in the corner. The only ones in bad shape were the two pothos by the door, which were on their last legs after being drowned morning after morning in the lazy officers' overnight tea. The abundant dregs in the two pots practically emanated noxious fumes.

Luo Wenzhou had left his wallet and keys lying on his desk without fear that anyone would take them—and, to Fei Du, they weren't worth taking anyway. Fei Du waited patiently in the office for a while, but he was bored stiff, and he soon grew sick of the room's smell. He didn't expect Luo Wenzhou to finish anytime soon, so he texted, *Need me to feed your cat?*

The sergeant was so busy that he only replied with a simple period. Fei Du took this as assent. He picked up the keys and left.

Luo Wenzhou's place was near the station, close enough for a bicycle ride, or a cab ride covered by the base fare alone. His previous visit had been adequate to familiarize Fei Du with the route to the apartment. Once there, he'd only opened the door a crack when a furball eagerly stuck its head out—and immediately realized that it wasn’t the right man at the door. The creature swooped under the sofa at the speed of light, then peeked out to look frantically around.

Tao Ran had summoned them midway through dinner last night, so there hadn’t been time to clean up. Instead, Luo Wenzhou had just channeled a student during a dorm inspection and stuffed all the dishes on the table into the fridge. The mess inside afforded no space for the final plate of deep-fried meatballs, so Luo Wenzhou had left that atop the six-foot fridge and prayed that the cat couldn’t climb up there.

Those prayers had clearly gone unanswered.

Porcelain shards were scattered across the apartment like stars in the sky, from the dining area all the way to the living room. The corpses of meatballs lay everywhere, each bearing tooth marks. Comrade Luo Yiguo’s passion for experimentation was extraordinary. He seemed to have tried every meatball, concluding via proof by exhaustion that none suited his palate.

His food bowl was empty and glistened slightly in the light—probably because the cat had been licking it. Fei Du poured in some dry cat food. After a pause, he also opened two cans of wet food and put them next to the bowl too. Luo Yiguo—so hungry that he’d been reduced to licking an empty bowl—couldn’t resist the temptation. He quietly poked his head out from under the couch. When he suddenly met Fei Du’s gaze, however, he scooted back, trembling.

Fei Du ignored him. He had to wash his hands twice to get rid of the cat food’s stench. When that was done, he found a broom in the kitchen and attempted to clear up the mess. He really wasn’t made for labor, though; he swept for ages without figuring out how to get all the debris into the pan. Having never before toiled, Fei-zong lifted a hand and leaned on the broom to survey the fruits of his labor. With an objective eye, he concluded that he'd made the floor shine…but in much the same way that the floors of the cafeteria at the station appeared to have been mopped with grease.

He promptly gave up and called a cleaning agency he knew of to hire an hourly worker for an emergency clean.

Just then, something touched the back of his foot. Fei Du turned to look and found that Luo Yiguo had come over. Some of the food in his bowl was gone too. Now that he'd eaten and drunk his fill, the cat seemed to have mustered some courage; he made a show of circling Fei Du a few times, then sniffed his feet hesitantly. When he realized that Fei Du had noticed him, he turned tail and shot two yards away…but after a while, Fei Du's lack of reaction emboldened him to venture back.

Fei Du pulled up his trouser legs and stooped down. He extended two fingers toward Luo Yiguo.

Luo Yiguo instinctively ducked backward, but then—seeing Fei Du motionless—he approached and sniffed, his whiskers trembling. Maybe the familiar smell of cat food had helped to gradually lower his defenses. His nose touched Fei Du's fingers; when nothing bad happened, he gathered the courage to lower his head and brush the top of it against Fei Du's palm.

Fei Du's hand froze.

This lack of response heartened Luo Yiguo further. He dismissed his own inner alarm bells; lifting his bushy tail high, he walked around Fei Du, sniffing the young man all over and letting out a soft, effete whine. Fei Du let his frozen hand fall to Luo Yiguo's back, stiffly but gently stroking his silky-smooth fur. Luo Yiguo began to scrabble at Fei Du, searching for a comfortable spot. He even pushed his face into Fei Du's sleeve, forcing Fei Du to lift his arm to roll the fabric up.

"Don't you remember me?" Fei Du asked the cat softly.

Luo Yiguo looked up with that head no bigger than a fist, eyeing Fei Du with a mixture of confusion and apprehension. Animals followed their instincts, and he was instinctively afraid of Fei Du, even if he didn't know why. Unfortunately, Luo Wenzhou had raised Luo Yiguo into an entirely food-motivated creature that knew no fear, so a single bowl of cat food overcame those instincts.

As Fei Du gazed down at the cat, his palm started to sweat. Carefully, he moved Luo Yiguo to one side, then jerked his hand back. The little animal's soft body, the rise and fall of his breathing, the beating of his heart—it was all unbearable to Fei Du. He shot to his feet and pressed his back against the wall, avoiding Luo Yiguo's curious nose.

What was "life"?

It was seemingly a biological term, yet most people understood what "life" meant long before they took a biology class. Some were very young when they first witnessed events like birth, aging, illness, or dying. Adults used their own experiences to explain life and death to children, some plainly, some fancifully. And there were those who formed their fuzzy concept of life by reading books or watching shows that brought it up constantly.

Fei Du dug out his phone and earbuds. Trying to escape, he hurriedly stuffed the earbuds into his ears, and a sad, familiar song filled his world. He couldn't help holding his breath as his gaze fell on the cat nearby. Luo

Yiguo was making a real nuisance of himself; with nothing to do now that he'd eaten his fill, he was combing through the broken porcelain and the meatballs. As he played happily with the latter, the floor gained even more oil stains.

That man's voice seemed to ring in Fei Du's ear. *"What is life?"*

He'd held Fei Du's hand and placed it on a small animal. Maybe it was a hamster, or a quail chick, or even a baby bunny—Fei Du couldn't remember. It was always an animal small enough to fit in a child's hand. All he remembered was that tiny ball of fluff curled in his palm, warm and soft. Its heartbeat was palpable, almost fluttering.

It was a strange feeling.

"This is life," said the voice.

The gentle hand guiding his suddenly closed tight. Like a massive pair of iron pliers, it clamped Fei Du's hand shut, forcing his fingers to pinch tight around that little creature's neck. The animal struggled and let out a dying cry. Involuntarily, young Fei Du struggled too, but the man controlled his movements with ease. He held on until the frantic heartbeat and thrashing dwindled to nothing in Fei Du's grasp.

"This is death," that voice said. *"You see, only one simple process leads from life to death, and it's not nearly as serious as humankind makes it out to be. Humans only romanticize it that way because they're social animals with brutish natures. On the one hand, they seek the support of their community and society for a better life, but on the other, they struggle to control their evil urges and desires. That's why they need agreed-upon rules to keep their behavior in check, rules such as 'laws' and 'principles.' The former are a contract with your society, and the latter exist to prevent*

you from breaking that contract in private. Such principles leave you open to brainwashing, so you accept the society's values and wholeheartedly align your behavior with that of the majority. Understanding that frees you of the pattern most people are trapped in. Want to experience the truth of life and death again? Why are you shaking your head? You must be humble; learning requires repetition and reinforcement for a lesson to truly be absorbed. Come on, let's do it again—"

The recollection was interrupted by a knock at the door. The hired cleaner had arrived. Fei Du shuddered violently, sweat beading on his temples, and he quickly pulled his foot from under Luo Yiguo.

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AN HOUR LATER, Fei Du brought a few cups of freshly brewed coffee back to the station.

All of the victims' families were gone except for Qu Tong's parents and Guo Heng, who sat across from each other. One side was still in disbelief, still hoping against hope; the other waited for the truth to be presented to him more than two decades late. Guo Heng chatted with Qu Tong's father, their conversation occasionally interrupted by sudden fits of tears from both members of the young couple. When that happened, they paused to calm down, then tried to comfort each other.

When Fei Du arrived at the office of the criminal investigation team, he saw a burly, middle-aged man with a scarred brow leading a group swiftly past. "…still at home," the man was saying. "Only the required personnel from each team should stay here on duty. Everyone else needs to go give Xiao-Tao a hand; he's low on manpower. I'll apply to make this a joint operation supported by the local stations—"

Catching sight of Fei Du, he cut himself off.

Fei Du deduced that this was one of the higher-ups at the bureau. Not knowing what Luo Wenzhou had said to his bosses, he decided to go introduce himself. At that point, however, the man simply gestured to the officers to hurry and do as he'd said. Then he walked up to Fei Du and extended a hand. "You must be Fei-zong. I'm Lu Youliang, the municipal bureau's acting director general. I signed off on your banner."

Fei Du put his coffee aside and gripped the man's large hand in a formal handshake. "Pleased to meet you, Deputy Lu."

They exchanged a few more niceties, and then Lu Youliang said, "Tao Ran and his team located the spot where the suspects were dumping the bodies. We're putting as many people on it as we can, so the dig shouldn't take long. We'll be able to give the public answers soon."

When they were in the memorial hall, Luo Wenzhou had mentioned that Su Hui's hometown was in Pinghai County, under Yancheng's jurisdiction. That was one of Yancheng's water sources so it wouldn't be surprising if the bodies had been dumped there. "Is it in Pinghai?" Fei Du asked. "I'm investing in a project in that area. They're in the middle of construction, so there are a number of workers on-site. If necessary, I could call and ask them to go help out."

"Huh?" Lu Youliang paused, then seemed to assume that Fei Du had misheard the news. "The guys must've mispronounced it—it's in *Binhai*, not Pinghai. It's a three- or four-hour drive away. That's our closest source of seawater, but it doesn’t even fall within our provincial government’s territory. Coordinating all this is really a mess…”

Despite the dim light of the corridor, Fei Du’s pupils shrank rapidly. After a moment, he found his voice again. “They sank the bodies in the *sea*? But isn’t it typhoon season? Wouldn’t it have been hard to dump them there?”

“Yeah, so they buried the ones they couldn’t sink. Those are the ones we’re looking for now, particularly Qu Tong. She’s crucial to the case.”

Qu Tong’s parents and Guo Heng approached them then; the presence of Deputy Lu and his team had caught their attention, and they wanted to ask for updates. A few of the officers on duty rushed forward to stop them from entering the office, but Deputy Lu quickly dismissed his subordinates. “Hey, no—it’s fine. Let them come sit. I understand how they must be feeling. I’ll talk to them.”

Fei Du cleared his slightly hoarse throat. “Please go ahead. Don’t let me get in the way.”

Lu Youliang nodded at him. “The suspects in this case are really…” He trailed off and heaved a heavy sigh. “Even catching them might not yield a satisfactory ending. I’m worried that we’ll see a repeat of what happened twenty years ago.” He nodded to Fei Du again, then marched quickly past him.

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THE BINHAI AREA WAS MEANT to be under development, but—possibly due to the increased focus on ecological conservation in recent years—incomplete conservation procedures and paperwork meant that the process had been delayed to this day. The only real development in the area was the palliative-care facilities operating on a handful of islands off the coast.

Certain schools had annual arrangements to bring their students on painting and sketching trips to the picturesque village nearby; that gave the seaside “resort town” and its rural little farm stays a bit of business at fixed times of the year. For the rest of the year, though, it was basically deserted.

Farther from the coastline, it was hilly. The peaks and valleys stretched into the distance, containing few signs of human life save for the old, weathered roads that passed through them. The shrubs and the thick, undisturbed forest were lush and green, flourishing in the salty sea breeze.

All the roads had been closed off. The lovely scenery that had been captured in the nature photographs adorning the apartment’s wall had all been found and marked. Those marked locations spanned more than six miles along the same little road with indistinct edges. Officers from Yancheng worked with Binhai’s local police to block the spots off with copious amounts of yellow tape.

“Deputy Sergeant Tao, we found one… Hey, wait! This body’s fresh!”

Qu Tong’s little body had been chopped into seven or eight pieces that were buried separately. By dawn, they’d finally found all those pieces. The wounds on her body matched cutting tools recovered from the

Xiangyang apartment, and forensics managed to extract bodily fluids from her remains.

This razor-thin silver lining made the middle-aged man that Lang Qiao had arrested fall to pieces immediately and tell them everything he knew.

“I was actually following a different little girl then. I knew her parents were busy and that she normally went home by herself. Who knew I’d run into a bizarre hostage situation? I was going to call the police, but that girl—that Su Luozhan—swayed me. She said that she liked this one—kept insisting that I take her instead. And I was familiar with the Xiling area, so without thinking, I… But I didn’t kill her! I didn’t kill anyone! Once it was over, I left! Honest! That guy—the cleaner—he barged in looking furious and grabbed Su Luozhan. It didn’t look right to me, so I got the hell out of there. I didn’t know they’d do something so sick. I really didn’t! I loved those girls so much. How could I bear to hurt them?”

Chapter 20

WHEN LUO WENZHOU WALKED OUT of the interrogation room, he felt almost delirious. Long, intense interrogations were torturous for both parties, especially when it came to suspects with as much mental fortitude as Xu Wenchao. To keep up the pressure on the suspect, Luo Wenzhou couldn't give himself room to breathe either.

The officers out in the field were still searching for supporting evidence, while in here, the interrogator and interrogated had been engaged in a battle of wits, trickery, and deduction, armed only with their observations of each other's expressions and the subtext in each other's words.

How much evidence do they have? How much did Su Luozhan tell them?

Where did he contradict himself? Which statements could be true, and which did he phrase to mislead us?

Are they trying to trick me?

How do we trick him into confessing?

Easing up the slightest bit would've given Xu Wenchao room to make excuses and retract things. At this point, the organ above Luo Wenzhou's neck had turned in for the night. He relied entirely on muscle memory to guide himself back to his office.

Qu Tong's parents had rushed to Binhai the second they heard the news, heedless of all attempts to stop them. Now only Guo Heng remained. When Luo Wenzhou saw him lying there, turned away, he assumed the man was asleep and automatically softened his footfalls. He picked up a nearby uniform jacket to cover him, but as he approached, Guo Heng looked over.

The wavy lines of wrinkles bracketing his eyes began at the bridge of his nose and extended all the way to his temples. They looked like cracks in parched earth. The yellowing whites of his eyes were reddened, shrouded in cobwebs of blood vessels, but there was no hint of sleep within them.

The criminal investigation team's offices, usually noisy, were now silent. The employees were either out in the field or out cold from exhaustion. As the two men regarded each other in silence, the air around them seemed to congeal into a thick, stagnant glue that not even the strongest air conditioning could blow away.

After a long time, Guo Heng spoke. He did so with difficulty. "Your…your boss, Mr. Lu…he told me everything."

Luo Wenzhou slowly pulled up a chair and sat facing him.

"Not in detail," Guo Heng clarified. "He said that your team was still verifying facts about the case. But can you tell me exactly what's going on now?"

Luo Wenzhou paused for a moment, then started from the beginning. "That summer twenty years ago, Guo Fei happened to meet a girl who said she'd come to Lianhuashan with her teacher. She was very pretty and wore a floral dress. But she seemed bad with directions; every time Guo Fei 'ran into' her, she was lost. One day, after cram school, Guo Fei bumped into her again. This time, the girl looked frantic. She said that her teacher was in the hospital and that she couldn't find her way back to the hotel. Guo Fei was a kindhearted child—Lianhuashan Elementary School still has her old report cards on file, and every semester, teachers called her altruistic. She tried to give the other girl directions, but she just didn’t understand them. Since it was only a brief detour, and she didn’t think it would make her too late, Guo Fei decided to take the other girl there herself…”

From the moment Luo Wenzhou said the name “Guo Fei,” Guo Heng had been shaking uncontrollably. Murky tears slipped from the corners of his eyes; impeded by wrinkle upon wrinkle, they rolled into the white hair at his temples. Luo Wenzhou paused, putting his hand on Guo Heng’s shoulder. The old man’s frail back, and the uneven rise and fall of his chest, gave the impression of a broken set of ancient bellows.

Guo Heng took a long, difficult breath. “Go on. Please go on.”

“That girl was Su Xiaolan. She tricked Guo Fei into consuming a spiked drink, then left her at the hotel to wait till Wu Guangchuan, the perpetrator, left the hospital. Wu Guangchuan was faking an illness as an excuse to get away from the other teachers, and he’d been given a school car to use. After killing Guo Fei, Wu Guangchuan hid her in the trunk and left Lianhuashan. Su Xiaolan took Guo Fei’s pencil case.”

Luo Wenzhou knew—from Su Xiaolan’s diary, and based on the Su family’s modus operandi—that Su Xiaolan herself had probably killed Guo Fei. He didn’t know whether Guo Heng could handle that information, however, so he carefully twisted the truth into a neat little bow.

“Su Xiaolan had a perverse relationship with the killer,” he continued in a factual, formal tone. “That made her very jealous of Guo Fei. Thus, she and the killer had an altercation while driving. She got out of the car in a fit of rage and ran across that hill you found. When she saw the public phone by the garbage dump, she thought of a way to vent her anger: by calling you and letting you hear that scream, and the sound of the bells in the pencil case jangling.”

“Why…why did she…”

“She was jealous that Guo Fei had parents like yourselves. That she had a happy family, that she would’ve grown into a young lady a thousand times better than Su Xiaolan and that she would’ve had things that Su Xiaolan would never have even if she lived another twenty years.”

Guo Heng looked at Luo Wenzhou, momentarily speechless.

“You didn’t kill the wrong person, Guo-shu. You were just…too kind ever to suspect the other person in the room,” Luo Wenzhou said softly. “But when you killed Wu Guangchuan in front of Su Xiaolan, it shocked her into finally realizing that her actions had consequences. She went on to live a twisted and painful life but committed far fewer crimes. In a way, you saved many potential victims—at least a hundred.”

Guo Heng only raised a hand to cover his eyes, crying soundlessly.

“Guo-shu…”

“That’s enough.” Guo Heng waved him off clumsily. “Stop trying so hard to find nice things to say just to comfort me, I beg you.”

Guo Heng had once been an impulsive, quick-tempered man, but he’d never been an idiot. He saw through such obvious lies. By rashly stabbing Wu Guangchuan, he’d made Su Xiaolan too scared to ever taunt the victims’ families like that again. In fact, she’d changed how she operated so that the girls she killed from that point on blended in with the multitudes of ordinary missing-person cases. Bringing her crimes to light had taken twenty whole years.

And it was all his fault.

“So where…where’s my Feifei now?”

“The main perpetrator of the early cases, Su Hui, wasn’t involved in her murder, so we suspect that Guo Fei was buried along the national highway that used to connect Lianhuashan and Yancheng.”

“Is it…is it possible to find her? Are you still looking?”

“It is,” said Luo Wenzhou. “People don’t disappear without a trace. She has to be somewhere; there’s always a clue to follow. Even if we don’t find her right now, there’s still hope for the future. And even if everyone else forgets, I’ll remember. Don’t worry.”

Guo Heng left the bureau in the morning. Luo Wenzhou saw him off, watching his back until it disappeared. He didn’t know what would become of Guo Heng, but whether you were sixty, seventy, or eighty, there was still a life to be lived, days to pass—you always had to look ahead. Luo Wenzhou wasn’t sure whether he was imagining it to make himself feel better, but it looked to him as though Guo Heng’s back was a little straighter than it had been when he first arrived.

At long last, Luo Wenzhou dragged his feet back to his office and slumped into his chair with a deep sigh. Then he was hit with the feeling that he’d forgotten something. Looking up, he saw a cup of cold coffee on his desk.

Oh, right! I asked Fei Du to wait for me!

Of course, the young master couldn’t possibly have waited at the station all night. Fei Du had probably left ages ago.

While Luo Wenzhou examined the cup of coffee, dazed, a hand appeared from next to him to claim it. The dark scent of woody cologne wafted from its sleeve and into Luo Wenzhou’s nostrils. He inhaled automatically. His nose felt a bit dry.

He didn’t know what luxury hotel Fei Du had emerged from, but the younger man wore a different suit now. Luo Wenzhou watched, befuddled, as he set takeout from the hotel—breakfasts and coffee—on the desk.

“You have way too much time on your hands,” Luo Wenzhou blurted out. “Always staying at a hotel instead of going home… Do you own the place or something?”

“You could say that,” Fei Du replied. “I hold a sixty percent stake in it.”

Only an asshole would come and show off generational wealth in front of a salaried worker, Luo Wenzhou thought.

“Didn’t you ask me to wait for you? Did you have something to discuss with me?”

“Oh. Yeah.” Luo Wenzhou opened the lid of his coffee and took a large gulp, hoping the caffeine would help him find his missing brain. “I wanted to talk to you about…”

What had it been again? Luo Wenzhou stopped, shocked to find a gap in his memory. However hard he searched, he came up blank—not a word, not even a punctuation mark. It felt like the first sign of Alzheimer’s.

Fei Du’s white shirt blurred before his eyes. He was starting to see double. “I need to tell you…”

Before Fei Du’s eyes, Luo Wenzhou mumbled a few more words in his apparent fugue state, then slumped against the back of his chair, fast asleep. Fei Du hurried to rescue the coffee cup from his hand before it could fall to the floor. That done, he arranged Luo Wenzhou's hand in a more comfortable position.

Frowning slightly in his slumber, Luo Wenzhou looked haggard. His exhausted eyelids were wrinkled into three layers, stubble covered his usually clean-shaven chin, and his face seemed shrunken, giving him the air of a depressed uncle. Working nonstop for forty-eight hours would have reduced even a heavenly immortal to exhaustion; of course Luo Wenzhou looked worse for wear. Yet somehow, when his usual suave and princely demeanor was gone, something sturdier and more distinguished emerged.

Leaning sideways against the desk, Fei Du held Luo Wenzhou's chin between two fingers. He turned Luo Wenzhou's face gently this way and that, studying it closely the way an antique collector might examine priceless Song dynasty Ru ware. After a moment, he straightened up and sighed inaudibly, admitting to himself that this face indeed touched his heart.

Just then, Lang Qiao strode in, her steps as heavy as if she were dragging a dead dog along behind her. She was so tired she thought she could have fallen asleep lying in the middle of the road—until the sight that awaited her in the chief's office banished any trace of sleep from her mind. Every dirty little novel she'd ever read about an arrogant, overbearing CEO flashed vividly before her eyes. The young beauty of the police squad stood gaping in the doorway, zombified.

To her surprise, the "degenerate CEO" inside the office didn't panic at all, merely turned, blinked at her, then offered her an exceptionally ambiguous smile. He pointed at the large bag of food and gestured for her to help herself, then filched Luo Wenzhou's half-empty cup of coffee, took a sip, and drifted out of the room.

***

THE FIRST RAYS OF DAWN stung Tao Ran's eyes so harshly that he almost couldn't open them. After his colleagues came to relieve him, he carelessly dusted off the dirt and soil that covered him, then got into a nearby car.

Inside the vehicle, his phone vibrated; Chang Ning had sent a photo over. It showed Chenchen lying in her arms, gripping the corner of Chang Ning's shirt tightly and doing her best to smile for the camera.

The doctor says that Chenchen's wounds are minor, so she can leave the hospital. My aunt wants to thank you properly. Can we have you and your colleagues over for a meal sometime?

For the first time, Tao Ran didn't reply to his crush immediately. He'd fallen asleep with the phone in his hand.

Fei Du returned to his office in a taxi. Before the workday began, he signed the documents as he'd promised to Miss Miao, then spent some time sitting alone in his tastefully designed office.

This had previously been the senior Fei-zong's office. Outside, there was a reception area for guests with a wine cabinet hidden in the wall. Next to that were floor-to-ceiling shelves. The top shelves housed a large collection of literary antiques, from scrolls made of lambskin vellum and silk to bamboo slips. The bottom shelves displayed the elder Fei-zong's expensive watch collection.

The other wall was covered entirely by a glass display cabinet full of ancient weaponry, including a waist-sheathed saber that had supposedly belonged to an emperor. Its handle was exquisite and elegant, and despite its age, the blade remained as bright as snow. Under the cabinet's cold light, it seemed to hunger to break free of the glass and sate its bloodlust.

At the center of a sofa set was a round showcase about four and a half feet tall. Inside, a collection of out-of-circulation coins formed a ring around a tiny display case, which contained three years' worth of winning pieces from an international jewelry design competition—only three years' worth, because by the fourth year, the comatose collector had been sent to a care home in Binhai.

This miniature museum of a reception area always stunned first-time guests to Fei Du's office. After lingering here long enough, they could feel the desire for money, the lust for power, the ambition and hunger bursting out of their every open pore. The reception area was distinct from the office, and the little passageway linking them was only wide enough for one. The clever bend in the passageway prevented light from the office from reaching the reception area. Two of the office walls contained small ventilating windows, and the back wall was floor-to-ceiling glass that provided a panoramic view of most of Yancheng. Below, the slow crawl of traffic and ant-like pedestrians were visible to the naked eye.

Fei Du rose and unlocked a filing cabinet to extract a slim folder. The folder contained a few contracts, a financial report, and briefs on fluctuations in significant assets; it was for a partnership between the Fei Corporation and the Bright Foundation, established while Fei Du's father was in charge. Fei Du's father had not only collaborated with this foundation, he'd even made regular donations to one of their charity funds.

Their contract had since expired, however, and the partnership came to a natural end without the foundation seeking to renew it.

A project proposal entitled “Transforming Binhai’s Ocean Resources into a Tourist Paradise: Building China’s Own Maldives” sat at the very bottom of the stack of documents in the folder. This was one of the projects the Bright Foundation had been interested in and asked the Fei Corporation to put money into. The board—under Fei Du’s father’s control—had refused on the basis that it would require too much capital without a well-established method of generating profits. Thus, the venture was abandoned.

“Binhai…” Fei Du underlined the name heavily with the cap of his pen.

There were three main factors to consider when dumping a body.

One was that you needed to choose an absolutely safe location, so that nobody outside your control would come dig it up—nobody would discover the secret underneath.

Two, you had to make a body indistinguishable from the corpses of those who'd died natural deaths, so that if it was unearthed, nobody would report it.

Three, you needed to ensure that the police couldn't identify a body if it *was* reported.

That third item had made sense twenty years ago, but today's sophisticated forensic techniques made it impossible to achieve. Xu Wenchao would definitely have focused on the first two factors.

So why Binhai?

If he'd dumped the bodies near the shoreline, the risk of someone fishing them up was high. But to dump them farther out, he needed to go out to sea, and not every season was suitable for that. That meant some bodies had to be buried on land. Wasn't Xu Wenchao afraid that those haphazardly buried bodies would be exhumed? Xu Wenchao and the three generations of the Su family had no connections to Binhai whatsoever—neither in terms of their lived experiences nor their ancestral records. So why had Xu Wenchao chosen that location? Had the freelance photographer simply found the place pretty and sparsely populated?

Epilogue

ONE WEEK LATER, this major case—unusually complex, long, and sensational—finally drew to a close thanks to the collaboration between two police jurisdictions. The racing-club musician who'd kidnapped Qu Tong was strong-armed into identifying one of the remaining four people in the photos. The group evidently had strict entry requirements. Anyone trying to join needed a referral, and at first, the only thing they were allowed to do was take Su Luozhan out for meals. They had to maintain that relationship for a long time and spend a lot of money before they finally became a VIP member.

The members ratted each other out. They popped up one after another, like clods of dirt clinging to a pulled-up carrot. The process unearthed old members who had quit the club long ago and weren't in the photos; some of these were even successful people of stature. It caused quite a stir when the police knocked on their doors.

As Fei Du had speculated, Guo Fei's body was discovered in a village burial site along the highway between Lianhuashan and the city. According to the locals, before cremation had become commonplace in the community, the burial site was used specifically for those who'd been killed, had committed suicide, or had died as children. There were a number of superstitious tales about the place, so most people didn't go near it. Around twenty years ago, one villager had gotten drunk and found himself there by accident, only to discover a new mound with no headstone. The villager was traumatized, and that became a horror story that circulated around the village for some time.

Sadly, nobody had ever looked into it, since the site was taboo.

Once the police broke the case, there was so much to do—dealing with the press, collecting evidence, prosecuting—that only when everything finally ended did Luo Wenzhou realize that it was already mid-September. At the end of the first day of Luo Wenzhou's return to normal working hours, he barely had a chance to rejoice at leaving work on time before he spotted the little sports car at the entrance. A familiar-looking bastard stood next to it, grinning as he watched the traffic cop write him a ticket.

Before Luo Wenzhou could react, Lang Qiao walked up behind him and let out a loud gasp. Since that day in Luo Wenzhou's office, she'd often thought about the mysterious smile Fei Du gave her before he left. She let her imagination run free during her daily commute, and her daydreams wove together all the worst dark-romance tropes in her head, from the domineering love interest claiming his prey by force to the angstiest, most passionate romantic tragedy. She'd watched the entire heartrending, X-rated drama series in her mind, but due to work demands, she hadn't yet had the chance to spoil it for the protagonist himself, Luo Wenzhou.

An autumn rain had fallen recently, and Fei Du's sudden appearance so shocked Lang Qiao that she stepped in a puddle and almost fell flat on her face. She threw herself at the wall for stability, gripping it with all available limbs.

Luo Wenzhou turned at the noise. Seeing her pose, he burst into utterly cruel laughter. "Why did you wear heels to work? We see each other all the time. Why act like we don't all know you're short?"

Lang Qiao rolled her eyes and fixed her heel with difficulty. She swallowed the warning on the tip of her tongue and flounced off in a wordless huff.

Fei Du had always worked during the day and played at night, occasionally making trips to harass Tao Ran—mostly to offer to share some fresh new toy he'd procured. He wouldn't turn up at the bureau every day for no reason. Luo Wenzhou used to spend all his time worrying about Fei Du, but that was when Fei Du was a child. Now that he'd grown into a handsome devil with no bad angles, nothing was really worth worrying about.

The city burned with life, and everyone rushed headlong into their busy days. Divided by seas of cars and mountains of people, it wasn't uncommon for friends not to meet for months. But although it had been less than a month since Fei-zong had hurried over to comfort the bureau with his presence and food, Luo Wenzhou felt—strangely—as if it had been a very long time since they'd last met.

Fei Du's car was as flashy as ever, but this time, the man himself had a far more by-the-book appearance.

He'd left off the glasses; instead of those, a pair of earbuds hung loosely over one ear. He wore jeans, and—unusually for him—his cotton button-up was done up properly, all the way to the second button from the top. His hair had been combed back carelessly, revealing his clear, handsome face. It was as if his soul itself had gotten a wash. Gone was his previous air of a rogue in gentleman's clothing. Now he simply came off as a slightly rebellious art student.

Luo Wenzhou stuffed his hands in his pockets and strolled over to Fei Du, unable to keep himself from cursing inwardly.

Men came in all shapes and sizes, and Luo Wenzhou's tastes were broad. He appreciated the type popular in the West, bursting with hormones and strength; he also appreciated those who met more traditional standards of bright, gentle beauty that could be likened to the moon or to jade. He'd never say no—as long as they weren't anything like Fei Du.

Fei-zong had been his least favorite type—a human cobra. His clothes had been impeccable, but the truths he told had so often been full of holes that they triggered trypophobia in anyone even slightly suspicious. His presence often provoked a sharp, intense feeling that he was crossing your boundaries. If you didn't want to be duped, you had to stay on guard at all times. Forget feeling appreciation—the mere thought of Fei Du had made Luo Wenzhou's head ache.

But it was the clean, fresh type, with a hint of character, who most easily drew Luo Wenzhou's eye; if the man was good-looking, that was his Achilles' heel. And that described Fei Du right now. After all, Fei Du was young; having hidden his venomous fangs, he brimmed with almost-genuine youthful energy.

Luo Wenzhou waved the young traffic cop off and patted the roof of Fei Du's car. He pointed at a commercial building across the street. "Turn right, and there's a shopping center. See it? That's the closest parking lot. They don't normally let private vehicles stop at the station entrance. You'd need a parking permit."

Fei Du gave him a smile; butter wouldn't have melted in his mouth. "Where do I apply for a permit?"

"You can't get our long-term parking permits retail or wholesale. You need to be a bureau employee, to start with. Or at least an employee's family member. You’re asking for a permit straight off the bat, but do you even have the right to one, Fei-zong?” Luo Wenzhou looked down casually to give his eyes a reprieve from the stimulation of Fei Du’s new look. He repressed a smile. “They only took your cast off a few days ago, and you’re already driving everywhere. What are you here for?”

Fei Du ignored the question. “Did you not drive today?”

“I lent my car to a colleague for his date,” said Luo Wenzhou.

“What a coincidence.” Fei Du’s eyes curved with a smile. He opened the car door behind him. “Would you like a ride, then?”

Luo Wenzhou froze. A slight breeze had accompanied Fei Du’s movement, making Luo Wenzhou starkly aware that the young man had skipped his stupid cologne today—the scent that wafted over was a mix of laundry detergent and some kind of aftershave. It was a clean smell, like an autumn breeze after cold rain.

It had to be intentional. But although Luo Wenzhou was on guard, his body betrayed him, getting into the car.

Ever the gentleman, Fei Du closed the door for him. As he was walking around to the other side, he noticed a disheveled figure carrying an old briefcase dash out of the station, then stop to look around the entrance. It was Tao Ran.

Fei Du paused halfway through opening the door. “Ge,” he said in greeting.

“Hey.” Tao Ran raked his hand through his hair as he walked toward Fei Du. His eyes were bright and shining, not registering at all that Fei Du was styled differently than usual. “Those guys… We don’t have to work overtime today. I went to the bathroom, and by the time I came out, everyone was gone except the people on duty. What are you doing here?"

"Settling some business," Fei Du said.

"Oh—okay." Tao Ran seemed distracted; he didn't ask anything further. "I was looking for you, actually. Chang Ning says that Chenchen's parents want to treat everyone to a meal sometime. Will you join us?"

"Oh…" Fei Du drawled.

"What?"

"A meal at Chenchen's place? So we'll be in charge of chatting with her parents and distracting them while you help Chang Ning-jie tidy and prepare the food?" Fei Du leaned lazily against the car. "Or maybe you can convince them to get some booze and give everyone a drink. After that, you can have Chang Ning take all the guests home, with you driving. It'd be even better if all of us third wheels paired off and disappeared, so that you could take her out for a night drive. Maybe see a movie or something."

Tao Ran hadn't actually thought too deeply about it, but in just a few words, Fei Du had lit the way for him. Now he seemed to glow. Too bashful to speak, he simply stood in place and chuckled, lost in mushy thoughts.

Then the window facing Tao Ran rolled down. "Okay, enough. I get the plan now," Luo Wenzhou snapped. "I'll make sure to tell our comrades about it tomorrow. Now will you stop flaunting your love life to bachelors right on the side of the street? Have some decorum!"

Never in a million years would Tao Ran have anticipated seeing a living, breathing Luo Wenzhou in Fei Du's car. As if in a dream, he stared with shock at Luo Wenzhou, then at Fei Du, his gaze swiveling back and forth between them three times. He wondered whether he was hallucinating. “Oh,” he said at last, rubbing his eyes and leaving without a fuss.

Deputy Sergeant Tao had walked at least fifty yards before he finally processed what he’d seen. *Wait. Was that Luo Wenzhou in Fei Du’s car?* he thought, feeling like an electric shock had run through his brain.

Luo Wenzhou, male, interested in men. Fei Du, male, interested in… humans!

Tao Ran swung around, his neck and shoulders cracking in protest, but the sports car on the roadside had moved, making its merry way to the main street and disappearing into the sea of traffic.

“I was seeing things,” Tao Ran concluded, nodding earnestly and stumbling away.

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“TURN LEFT UP AHEAD. This route’s closed for construction,” Luo Wenzhou directed placidly, as if he really were just hitching a ride home. He’d asked why Fei Du had come, but the little bastard insisted on acting mysterious—he wouldn’t say—so Luo Wenzhou didn’t bother asking again. He’d just wait for Fei Du to reveal his motives in his own time.

Unexpectedly, Fei Du drove straight to Luo Wenzhou’s place without any fanfare. “We’re here,” was all he said.

Luo Wenzhou paused. *Wait… So? What’s next?*

Fei Du’s sharp eye caught the confusion in his gaze. “That’s it. I just wanted to give you a ride home,” he said, a very Fei Du-esque smile playing at the corner of his lips. That smile brought the sunny, boyish disposition he'd been maintaining till now crumbling down. Underneath that guise was that same familiar demeanor, that same air. Lowering his voice coyly, he leaned in to speak in Luo Wenzhou's ear. "Did you hope that I had something else in mind, Sergeant Luo?"

These were common tricks playboys used to heighten the tension—being close one minute and distant the next; stepping on the line but never crossing it; not explaining themselves, only beckoning mysteriously from afar before darting away. Anyone who ventured forth, unable to fight their curiosity, would fall into such a playboy's trap and dance to his tune with every step.

Since Luo Wenzhou ran in similar circles, he knew all the tricks and knew them well. He'd never had them used on him, though. He had no comeback, no excuse; in the wake of his wandering thoughts, of having his expectations so flirtatiously raised and then dashed, he didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Taking a breath to calm the tickle of desire in his chest, he decided nonchalance was the best strategy. After a pause, he opened the car door and patted it. "Good car. Shame it can't go fast within the city limits—what a waste. Bye. Thanks for the ride."

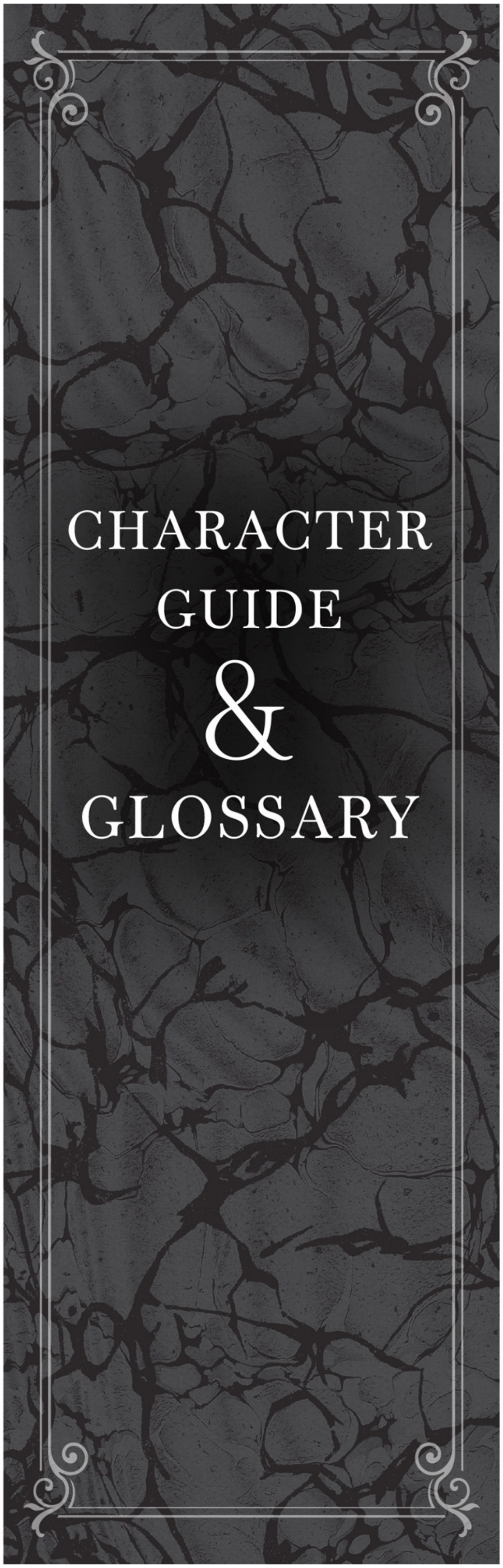
Then he got out and went in to feed his cat without a second look, as if nothing had happened.

Fei Du watched Sergeant Luo until he'd entered the building. Then he started the engine again. "You're welcome," he murmured. "See you tomorrow."

THE STORY CONTINUES IN

Silent Reading

VOLUME 3



CHARACTER GUIDE & GLOSSARY

CHARACTER GUIDE

MAIN CHARACTERS

LUO WENZHOU (骆闻舟): Sergeant on Yancheng Municipal Public Security Bureau's criminal investigation team.

FEI DU (费渡): Rich young chairman of the Fei Corporation, which he inherited when his father suffered an accident that left him comatose.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

YANCHENG MUNICIPAL PUBLIC SECURITY BUREAU

LU YOULIANG (陆有良): Acting director general.

TAO RAN (陶然): Deputy sergeant on criminal investigation team.

LANG QIAO (朗乔): Member of criminal investigation team. Also called "Er-Lang" and "Xiao-Qiao-er."

YANG ZHENGFENG (杨正锋): Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran's late shifu. Sometimes called "Lao-Yang" or "Yang-lao."

THE XILING BUS HIJACKING

HU LINGLING (胡玲玲): Teacher from Number Sixteen Junior High in Yancheng.

HAN JIANG (韩疆): Bus driver frequently employed by Number Sixteen Junior High.

QU TONG (曲桐): Eleven-year-old schoolgirl from Number Sixteen Junior High.

THE LIANHUASHAN KIDNAPPINGS

WU GUANGCHUAN (吴广川): Onetime respected teacher at Brocade Junior High. Later found to have sexually assaulted children. Killed by Guo Heng.

GUO FEI (郭菲): Eleven-year-old schoolgirl who went missing on her way home from school. Nicknamed “Feifei.”

GUO HENG (郭恒): Father of Guo Fei. Personally investigated her disappearance. Wu Guangchuan’s killer. Was found guilty of murder and sent to prison.

SU XIAOLAN (苏筱岚): Final victim discovered in Wu Guangchuan’s house.

SU HUI (苏慧): Mother of Su Xiaolan.

SU LUOZHAN (苏落盏): Daughter of Su Xiaolan.

XU WENCHAO (许文超): Onetime classmate of Su Xiaolan and class representative at Brocade Junior High.

OTHERS

LUO YIGUO (骆一锅): Cat belonging to Luo Wenzhou, who likens the cat to Fei Du.

CHANG NING (常宁): An old schoolmate of Tao Ran's living in his building in whom Tao Ran is interested.

ZHANG YUCHEN (张雨晨): Ten-year-old cousin of Chang Ning. Usually called "Chenchen."

NAME GUIDE

NAMES, HONORIFICS, AND TITLES

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

-ER: Suffix meaning “son” or “child.” Affectionate diminutive. Usually applied to monosyllabic names, or one syllable of a multisyllabic name.

DA-: Prefix meaning “big” or “elder.” Can be added before an elder’s title, like “dage” or “dajie,” or before a name.

LAO-/-LAO: Prefix or suffix meaning “old.” Usually added to a surname and used in informal contexts. Can be used in an affectionate context; not always used literally.

XIAO-: Prefix meaning “little” or “younger.” Can be added before a junior’s title or name. Often used in affectionate or familiar contexts; not always used literally.

-ZONG: Suffix applied to names of CEOs or other high-ranking people.

Family

GE/GEGE: “Elder brother.” Can be used to address a literal brother or unrelated male peer. Can also be used as a suffix.

JIE/JIEJIE: “Elder sister.” Can be used to address a literal sister or unrelated female peer. Can also be used as a suffix.

-SHU: “Younger paternal uncle.” Can be used to address a literal uncle or unrelated older male peer. Can also be used as a suffix.

Social Standing and Seniority

LAOSHI: Term of respect for teachers and professionals.

SHIFU: Term for one’s teacher, master, or mentor.

GLOSSARY

ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISIONS: The highest-level administrative divisions in the People's Republic of China (PRC) make up the **provincial level (省级, shengji)**. These divisions cover certain large municipalities like Beijing and Shanghai in addition to provinces. Yancheng is implied to be such a provincial-level city.

Provincial-level administrative divisions are subdivided into **prefectural-level (地级, diji)** divisions. Districts in large cities like Beijing and Shanghai fall into this category. Below the prefectural level is the **county level (县级, xianji)**, followed by the **township level (乡级, xiangji)**.

PUBLIC SECURITY: The main law-enforcement agency of the PRC is known as the **Ministry of Public Security (公安部, Gong'anbu)**. Police stations within the Ministry of Public Security are stratified according to the same system as administrative divisions:

PROVINCIAL LEVEL: **Public Security Department (公安厅**, **Gong'anting)**

MUNICIPAL LEVEL: **Public Security Bureau (公安局**, **Gong'anju)**

DISTRICT LEVEL: **Public Security District Bureau (公安分局**, **Gong'anfenju)**

SMALLER DIVISIONS: **police stations (派出所, paichusuo)**

In addition to fighting crime and maintaining order, police—especially those in smaller departments—manage residency and immigration records. Higher-level departments have more resources to deal with serious crimes.

LEGAL PROTECTION FOR MINORS IN MAINLAND CHINA

AGE OF MAJORITY: The age of majority is eighteen. However, fourteen is the age of consent, as well as the age of criminal responsibility for certain crimes including intentional homicide.

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: In China, statutory rape is punishable by prison sentences from ten years to life, or by the death penalty. However, from 1997 to 2015, a lighter prison sentence of five to fifteen years could be handed down if the victim was viewed as a sex worker, as this was classed as a different crime.

PRINCIPLE OF LIGHTER PUNISHMENT: The Chinese justice system holds that if the laws in place when an act was committed stipulated a lighter punishment than those at the time of prosecution, the lighter punishment applies. This could apply to the prosecution of child sexual abuse cases.

DEATH RITUALS

As burials reduce available arable land, official state policy promotes cremation, and burying the dead is illegal in some regions. Ashes are usually stored in columbaria attached to cremation centers or temples. However, some people continue to bury their dead “illegally” for reasons of tradition or religion.

Many Chinese families practice ancestor veneration. This can entail prayer, the burning of incense, paper offerings, and spirit money.

About the Author

priest

An internationally renowned author who writes for the novel serialization website JJWXC. priest's books have inspired multimedia adaptations and been published in numerous languages around the world. priest is known for writing compelling drama that incorporates humor and creativity, and the grand sense of style that infuses her worldbuilding. Her works include *Stars of Chaos: Sha Po Lang, Guardian: Zhen Hun, Liu Yao: The Revitalization of Fuyao Sect*, *Silent Reading: Mo Du,* and *The Defectives,* among others.

Footnotes

Chapter 1

[1] A parody of Du Fu (杜甫)’s poem “Jueju” (绝句): “Two orioles sing among the green while a flock of little egrets flies to the sky.”

Chapter 2

[2] From Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s short story “The Sign of the Four.”

Chapter 3

[3] The Young Pioneers is a communist youth organization that most schoolchildren in China participate in.

[4] Novel by Vladimir Nabokov.

Chapter 4

[5] From Steve Chou’s song “Zai Chu Fa (Onward Again).”

[6] From Maxim Gorky’s poem “The Song of the Stormy Petrel.”

Chapter 6

[7] Incense is often used as a funerary offering.

Chapter 11

[8] A common line in operas, plays, and xiangsheng.

Chapter 17

[9] Viral novelty song about Beijing’s fifth ring road popularized by Yue Yunpeng.

Chapter 18

[10] Certain municipalities only admit cars with local license plates, and the number of local plates issued per year is limited.

Lambs to the Slaughter

Yancheng Municipal Bureau is called in to handle a school bus hijacking—a bizarre crime, but seemingly an isolated one. Sadly, the police are unable to return one of the bus's young passengers to her parents. She's vanished without a trace.

The schoolgirl's disappearance leads Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran to reexamine a police investigation that took place twenty years earlier. That strange case seems to have haunted almost everyone who lived through it—especially Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran's own mentor.

Soon, it's impossible to overlook the fact that the school bus passenger wasn't the first young girl to go missing in Yancheng. On the contrary, girls have been vanishing into thin air for twenty years. And the next to go missing is one Tao Ran knows personally.

Dealing with that bus hijacking already forced Luo Wenzhou to enlist Fei Du's help, and it seems he won't get a break from the petulant young scion anytime soon. The only way for Tao Ran and Luo Wenzhou to find this girl alive may be to follow Fei Du's instincts—however strange or disturbing they may be...

A DANMEI CRIME THRILLER
WOVEN WITH MURDER,
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